JAN.
25c

THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

GUN THE MAN DOWN!

A STORY OF DEATH-MARKED TRAILS

by

WILLIAM VANCE

IF IT SLIPS... IF IT CHAFES... IF IT GRIPES... THEN

THROW AWAY THAT TRUSS!

Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry, and fear—if we provide you with the support you want and need? Learn NOW about this perfected truss-invention for most forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire . . . you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy most of life's activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting fear of Rupture lessened in your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained* . . . have worn our Appliance without the slightest inconvenience. Perhaps we can do as much for you. Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where other trusses have failed is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless *do not despair.* The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

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Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that helps Nature support the weakened muscles gently but securely, day and night. Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for relief from pain and worry,—results beyond the expectations of the writers. What is this invention—how does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Air-Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

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C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

SENT on TRIAL!

No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention, THEN decide whether you want to try for the comfort—the wonderful degree of freedom—the security—the blessed relief thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found the answer to their prayers! And you risk nothing as the complete Brooks is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

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TV now reaches from coast-to-coast. 25 million homes now have Television sets; thousands more are being sold every week. About 200 TV stations are now on the air. Hundreds of others are being built. This means more jobs, good pay jobs with bright futures. More TV operators, installation, service technicians will be needed. Now is the time to get ready for success in TV.

AVAILABLE TO VETERANS UNDER G.I. BILLS

WANT YOUR OWN BUSINESS?
Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Joe Travers, a graduate of mine from Asbury Park, N. J. says: "I've come a long way in Radio-Television since graduating. Have my own business on Main Street."

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As part of my Communications Course I send you kits of parts to build the low-power Broadcasting Transmitter shown at left. You use it to get practical experience putting a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of broadcasting station operators. An FCC Commercial Operator's License can be your ticket to a better job and a bright future. My Course gives the training you need to get your license.

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Nothing takes the place of PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. With my Servicing Course you build the modern Radio shown at right, a Multitester which you use to help fix sets while training. Many students make $10, $15 a week extra fixing neighbors' sets in spare time soon after enrolling. My book shows other equipment you get and keep.

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Training plus opportunity is the PERFECT COMBINATION for job security, good pay, advancement. In good times, the trained man makes the BETTER PAY, GETS PROMOTED. When jobs are scarce, the trained man enjoys GREATER SECURITY. Radio-TV needs men of action. NRI can provide the training you need for success in Radio-TV—for just a few hours of your spare time a week. But you must decide that you want success.

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Without obligating you in any way I'll send an actual lesson to prove that my training is practical, thorough. Also my 64-page book to show good job opportunities for you in Radio-TV. Terms for NRI training are as low as $5 a month. Many graduates make more in two weeks than total cost of training. Mail coupon now. J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dpt. 3NR1. Washington 9, D. C. OUR 40TH YEAR.

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VOLUME 64 JANUARY, 1954 NUMBER 3

Thrill-Packed Western Novelettes

Ride Clear of Texas Guns! ..... Will Cook 12
Northern gold could buy anything in Texas after the war . . . land, cattle and—if you met up with Marshal Floyd Race—sure death!

Twelve Days to Die! ..... Bart Cassidy 42
When Dandridge got to Abilene, his cheating pard would meet him—with a one-way ticket to boothill!

The Range That Hell Forgot! ..... Frank Peace 54
Terror was the only guest at Willy's wedding . . .

Gun the Man Down! ..... William Vance 74
The only man who could help Ramey was dead—and Ramey was wanted for his murder!

Smashing Frontier Short Stories

Gunman's Gal ..... Richard Ferber 32
The kid dolled up to go courting—death!

Gambler's Luck ..... Bill Gulick 68
Jeff's life hung on the toss of a silver dollar . . .

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—And—

In the Saddle ..... A Department 6

Best in the West! ..... David Weiss 8

Cheaper to Die ..... Bess Ritter 10

Lived Too Soon ..... David Crewe 111

ALL STORIES COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

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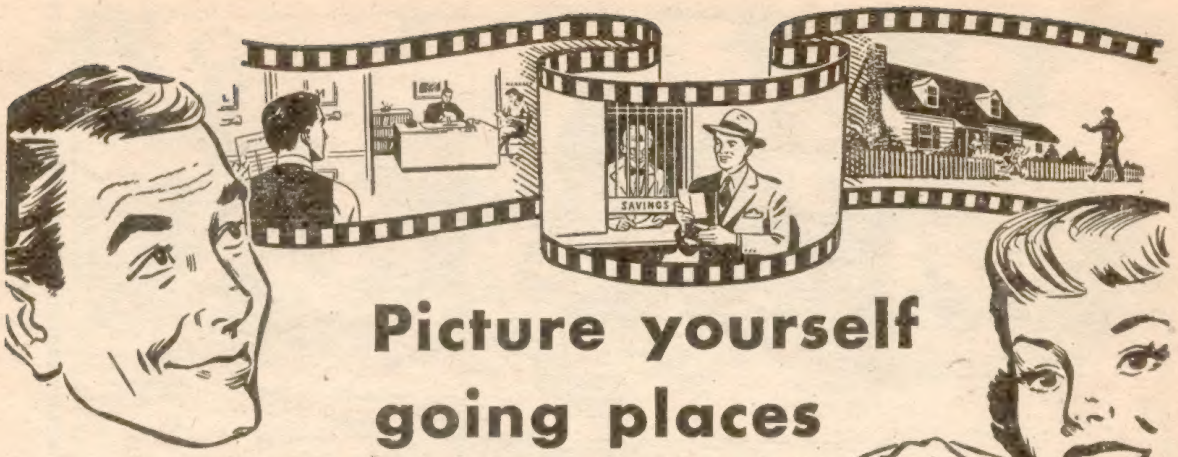

Picture yourself going places

You've done it often. Call it day-dreaming if you like, but you've seen yourself in a bigger job — giving orders and making decisions — driving off in a smart new car — buying your family a fine home.

There's nothing wrong with dreams. But how about making them come true? *You can do it,* if you're willing to try!

Look around you. The men who are going places are the *trained* men. They've learned special skills that bring them better jobs and higher pay. It's the men *without* training whose dreams never come true.

What are you going to do about it? Just wait and wish? If you really *want to succeed,* you can get the training you need by studying at home in your spare time. International Correspondence Schools offer you a course in just about any field you choose, giving you the practical plus the bedrock facts and theory. No skimming or skimping! And you'll be earning while you learn. Students report better jobs and more pay within a few months.

Look over the list of subjects in the coupon below. Pick out the one that interests you most — the one that holds the greatest future for you. Then mark the coupon, and mail it today. *Find out* what I. C. S. can do for you. It costs only a stamp or postcard, but it's the first step if you want to go places!

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"I noticed that the trained men held the better jobs. That's when I decided to take an I. C. S. course. Enrolling with I. C. S. was one of the smartest things I ever did. The position as Plant Engineer I hold today is largely due to the 'know-how' derived from my I. C. S. texts. I. C. S. can help any man who will study."

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- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding and Refinishing
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Occupation_____

Special tuition rates to members of the U. S. Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

IN THE SADDLE

WHEN WE think of Texas Rangers, sheriffs, and Range Detectives, who are now called Brand inspectors, we are inclined to think of law enforcement officers chasing rustlers of a bygone day.

But we would be wrong; these boys, the officers and rustlers, are still doing business along the same old lines. Every month the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association makes a report on them to its members, listing all the cases closed during the month.

Listen to a recent report for one month in 1952. It sounds as though it might have been taken from a cowtown newspaper of fifty or seventy-five years ago:

John Thomas Wilkerson was tried in District Court of Harris County on February 6 for theft of eighteen head of cattle from Lloyd Matthews and others. On a plea of guilty, he was given a seven-year penitentiary sentence.

"Evidence in this case was secured by Constable O. T. Busch of Humble, Texas Ranger E. C. Campbell, Deputy Sheriff Roy Bass, and Inspectors G. O. Toner of Houston, and Buck Echols of Liberty.

"Between December 18 and January 6, the officers had recovered eighteen head of cattle stolen in this cas . . .

"Charlie Rice of Brownwood, Texas, was tried in the district court of Coryell County for theft of cattle from Herbert Hallmark. The trial resulted in a ten-year penitentiary sentence. Evidence in this case was secured by Joe White, Sheriff of Coryell County, Texas Rangers Nordyke and Horton, and Brand Inspector Herman Porter."

Which proves that the more things change, the more they remain the same. The Rangers and the rustlers are still playing tag in Texas; everything is just like it was in the old days, except for the rope. They don't hang them and get them out of their misery these days. They send them to prison where they can live at the ranchers' expense and enjoy their escape from high taxes and high prices.

—The Editor

HER HIGHNESS
JOAN THE WAD
9, JOAN'S COTTAGE
Lanivet, Bodmin, Cornwall, England
"ALWAYS UPON YOU DAME FORTUNE WILL NOD, IF YOU ALWAYS CARRY YOUR WEE JOAN THE WAD"
WONDERFUL LUCK. "Would you be so kind as to forward one Joan the Wad History. I am very anxious, as I have heard so much about her. My friend has one and has had wonderful luck since" writes Mrs. Douglas Campbell of 150 Leinster St., St. John, N. B., Canada.
BUSINESS SAVED. Mr. Shadrack Charo of Malindi, Kenya, West Africa, writes 12.2.52: " . . . am sending P.O. for One Joan and one Jack for my wife. The one you sent has proved useful. I gave it to my wife who is running a shop. Before that we had decided to close the shop owing to lack of customers, but now the shop runs nicely and I have no hesitation to say that it is due to 'Joan'."
DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK ?
BETTER HEALTH—MORE FRIENDS. "Enclosed find $5.00 for 3 more 'Joan the Wad' mascots. Since I got Joan the Wad I have had better health and more friends. I wouldn't give up 'Joan the Wad' and think she's wonderful . . . you just have to have faith in her" writes Mrs. Lucy Getts of 1019 Cedar Ave., Swanton 5, Pa. U.S.A.
LUCK TURNED. Mrs. K. Raynes of Crown Mines, Johannesburg, S. Africa, writes 22.9.52: " . . . enclose P.O. for a 'Joan the Wad' and also two 'Jack O' Lanterns'! Have already received a 'J.T.W.' for my husband. We had her one day when his luck turned and he won $336.00. All our faith are in both. Do let me have all three, including History."
HURRY
Daisey Harris of Greensboro, N.C., U.S.A. writes 25.3.53: "I was so thrilled when I received my little Joan and won $40."
G. W. K. Botchey of Agona-Nyakrom, Gold Coast, W. Africa writes 10.11.52: "Four of my companions have won $1,960 since receiving your mascots."
SEND NOW
JOAN THE WAD
is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that she has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.
WON HAMPER: "I received my 'Joan the Wad' this morning and won a hamper of groceries the day (Feb. 19th) she was mailed to me. I feel my luck has changed" writes Leslie Dales of Edmonton, Can., 22.2.52.
Just send Two Dollars and a large self-addressed envelope to:
9 JOAN'S COTTAGE
LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL, ENGLAND
and I will send you both History and Mascot.

BEST IN THE WEST!

By

DAVID WEISS

HISTORIANS of the old West tend to disagree about everything from Calamity Jane to Custer's Last Stand, but about one man they are certain. The greatest trapper, plainsman, scout, explorer, and Indian guide who ever lived was Jim Bridger, the Daniel Boone of the West.

Before he reached his fifteenth birthday, Jim Bridger was already a noted scout. And before he died, he had laid out the Oregon Trail, explored the Rocky Mountains as no man had done before and since, and become the first white man to gaze upon the Great Salt Lake.

Not only did Jim discover the famous South Pass, but also Two Ocean Pass—where a small stream divided, some water traveling all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, the other flowing into the Pacific.

For years Jim's stories of the wonders he saw roaming the West were considered little more than "trappers tales." The biggest liar west of the Mississippi, old Jim was called, when he told about the glass mountains and boiling springs he had seen in his explorations. But decades later, when other explorers reached places like the Yellowstone, they had to admit Jim had told the truth. Everything was exactly as he had described.

There was nothing wrong with Jim Bridger's eyesight; in fact, he had extraordinary vision. One Army officer never ceased talking about the time Jim pointed to a nearby mountain and said he saw an Indian village. "Where?" the Army officer asked, searching for it with binoculars. "You'll see," Jim answered. And he did—when they had marched ten more miles. What Jim had seen with his naked eyes, the officer had missed with a telescope.

Although Jim Bridger could neither read nor write, he could draw a map with a piece of charcoal that was often more accurate than anything that a topographical engineer could produce.

Once asked to accompany an expedition seeking a short cut to the South Platte, Jim said, "I can't go but I'll draw you the route." With a stem of a clay pipe he traced it out on a dirt floor in five minutes. And this became the famous route subsequently used by the Overland Stage, Pony Express, and the Union Pacific.

Hardly a man ventured into the West in those days without trying to enlist the services of Jim Bridger. When General Albert Sidney Johnston marched to Utah to suppress the Mormons, he hired Jim as a guide. So did Colonel G. M. Dodge on the Union Pacific surveying expedition. And so did Sir George Gore who arrived on a hunting expedition with a retinue of 50 servants or William Drummond Shaw, the Britisher, who brought white shooting jackes and rare brandy to a land where most men were lucky to have a tin cup and skinning knife.

(Continued on page 113)

Whee!

FREE as a bird...

A "Quick-Action" OPPORTUNITY to

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1st Prize $15,000

The Amazing New EnterPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST

Sponsored by the NATIONAL BOOK CLUB

Get the Facts FREE! But ACT NOW!

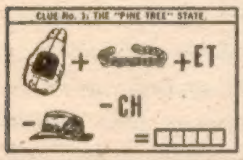
HOW TO SOLVE SAMPLE PUZZLE

CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.

You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

Fun? Yes! Now Solve This Typical Contest Puzzle

CLUE No. 2: THE "PINE TREE" STATE.



Here's a quick-action puzzle contest that rings the bell. It's fair, it's square — and it offers the winners a golden opportunity to get a new slant on Life! Just imagine — $15,000 in nice crisp crackling $100 bills! Well — YOU have the opportunity to win this kind of money but you must act now! Simply fill out the coupon below and mail. The very day we get your coupon we'll rush you full particulars on the amazing new EnterPRIZE "Quick-Action" Puzzle Contest. Here's the golden opportunity you've been waiting for! *Grab it!*

FUN TO ENTER! FUN TO DO!

No Gimmicks! Only Skill Counts!

The EnterPRIZE "Quick-Action" PUZZLE CONTEST is the contest every puzzle-minded person in the country has been waiting for. This contest is sponsored by the National Book Club to introduce its publications to as many new friends as possible. Just look at the SAMPLE PUZZLE at the left. Here is a typical puzzle with every picture waiting to be identified. Everything open and above board — nothing tricky. That's one big reason you'll agree this is among the fairest, squarest contests ever offered to American puzzle-fans.

FAIR AND SQUARE — ONLY STANDARD PICTURES USED! AN AMAZING NEW CONCEPT IN PUZZLES

To make the contest fair and square for one and all, the Judges and Sponsor of the EnterPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST have decided to take their picture illustrations only from READILY AVAILABLE AND OBTAINABLE SOURCES.

AND MORE! Every solution to every puzzle has a point value according to an error-proof table of letter values. You will know AT ONCE if your answer is right or wrong.

WIN REAL MONEY!

You owe it to yourself to try to stop money worries and GET ON THE ROAD TO SECURITY. And here's your opportunity. For the price of a postage stamp, we will send you FREE the Entry Form, the Official Rules, the First Series of Puzzles — EVERYTHING you need to enter. So make up your mind now — decide to win! Get the facts and MAIL COUPON TODAY!!

Big Bonus for Promptness

Mail this coupon at once and learn how you can qualify to win a special extra promptness bonus of either a 1954 Riviera Buick or a beautiful Ranch Mink Coat. The choice is up to you if you win.

Remember the PROMPTNESS BONUS – MAIL TODAY!

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS – MAIL COUPON TODAY

ENTERPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST
P. O. Box 660, General Post Office, Brooklyn 1, N. Y.

I want full particulars about the $25,000.00 ENTERPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST. Please mail me FREE the Official Entry Form, Rules, and First Series of Puzzles.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____

(Add Zone, if any)

PLEASE PRINT PLAINLY 130

CHEAPER TO DIE

By BESS RITTER

IF YOU think that today's cost of living is high, try comparing it with what you'd have paid for the necessities of life if you had been a gold seeker living anytime between 1850 and 1900, anywhere out in the far reaches of the west:

Here a three-ounce bar of chocolate would stand you around $10. A 100-pound bag of flour was sold for $40. And, if you happened to live in a hotel and wanted some vegetables, you bought these yourself from an enterprising homeowner who made a profitable hobby out of part-time gardening. He grew onions, radishes, potatoes, cucumbers and tomatoes, and sold them for approximately 25c apiece. Then you took them to a restaurant and had them cooked special—at a special extra price. Eggs were generally in stock, at one dollar per. If you liked them fried in butter, that was 50c more.

Services were proportionate: The cost of getting a shirt washed wavered at around $2. The fee for pressing a suit was $5. You could have your shoes shined for just about the same sum. Your watch could be repaired for up to $50.

If you were ill, you paid plenty for the privilege. One pill cost one dollar—and consisted, at that price, of hardly more than sugar. A visit to the doctor ranged around $50. Dental fees came to just about as much cash, but you didn't mind if you'd struck it rich. As a matter of fact, you'd willingly have fillings placed in your mouth —if they consisted of the gold that you yourself had mined. If you felt really good, you went even further, and had sound teeth pulled—and replaced with gold.

You happily threw away your homespun trousers for a suit of fine broadcloth boasting a price tag from $200. to $1,000. You looked hard until you found a plug hat to match, which you exchanged for $50. And you were delighted to discard your old red flannel shirt for a boiled one that stood you about the same amount of cash. Then you replaced the plain buttons with bona fide diamonds—the bigger and flashier, of course, the better.

However, if you were one of the not-so-lucky diggers who didn't strike it, you weren't nearly so enthusiastic about giving out $65. for a worn pair of shoes or some second hand pants. New ones were definitely out of the question, ranging as they did around $100. You did without bedroom slippers altogether—unless you happened to have about $70. to spend, which was the tariff for those made of calf or goat skin. Your wife wore her dress till it was threadbare—for a replacement, made of cotton, cost $95.

But you didn't have to dig gold in order to afford things. Instead, if you so chose, you could have it handed to you by working as a dock hand for $60 a day, or putting in time as a carpenter for a like amount. A mason or a housebuilder received around $80. Streetcleaners got $175. weekly. Office help received anywhere from $200. to 360. Bartenders hit the jackpot—at $400.

Women got a good share of this kind of gold too—they could chambermaid in a hotel for $50 daily, or cook in a restaurant for as much as $90. Yes, indeed, the good—cheap!—*old days!*

FORD HAS THE BEST XMAS VALUES THIS YEAR

7 Day-In-The-Week PANTY Pair Complete Set

BREATH-TAKING PEEK-A-BOO DUPONT NYLON

A delightful novelty gift that will bring out the love light in her eyes. She will think of you everyday in the week as she wears her Day-In-The-Week lingerie

A pair for everyday in the week

7 Gorgeous Colors — Exquisitely Embroidered with the 7 DAYS OF THE WEEK.

All for $5.95 complete postpaid

Azalia Pink
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Shocking Blue
Lilac Tyme
Hawaiian Sky
Dove White
Translucent Black for Sat.

Sizes S-M-L

Use our convenient Lay-A-Way plan. $2 down reserves this purchase.

IDENT PHOTO GRAPH

THAT'S THE KIND I WANT

$7.95 Incl. Fed. Tax postpaid

Use our convenient Lay-A-Way Plan. $2. Down reserves this purchase.

- Sterling Silver Top
- Beautiful designed expansion band
- Precision made secret photo compartment
- Handsomely packaged in satin lined jewelers box

A gift for both men and women, that will be near and dear to their hearts. This new bracelet craze is sweeping the country. Now for the first time at this popular low price—it has everything, for the perfect gift. No wonder everyone says "That's the kind I want."

World Famous Portable ELECTRIC ORGAN

America's most spectacular musical novelty. The gift of gifts for the entire family from Grandma to Junior. Watch everyone's eyes open in amazement as you play a complete song from simple illustrated music sheets given you free with each organ. So easy any child can play.

$19.95 post-paid

- Portable, can be placed anywhere
- 25 Sparkling Keys
- 2 Chromatic octaves—accurately tuned
- Produces the rich, sustained tones of a true organ

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Panty Set
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Sizes S - M - L

Ident-O-Graph
- ☐ Enclosed find $7.95 Send postpaid
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Ladies ☐ Men's ☐

Organ
- ☐ Enclosed find $19.95 Send postpaid
- ☐ Enclosed find $5.00 Reserve this purchase

NAME .....

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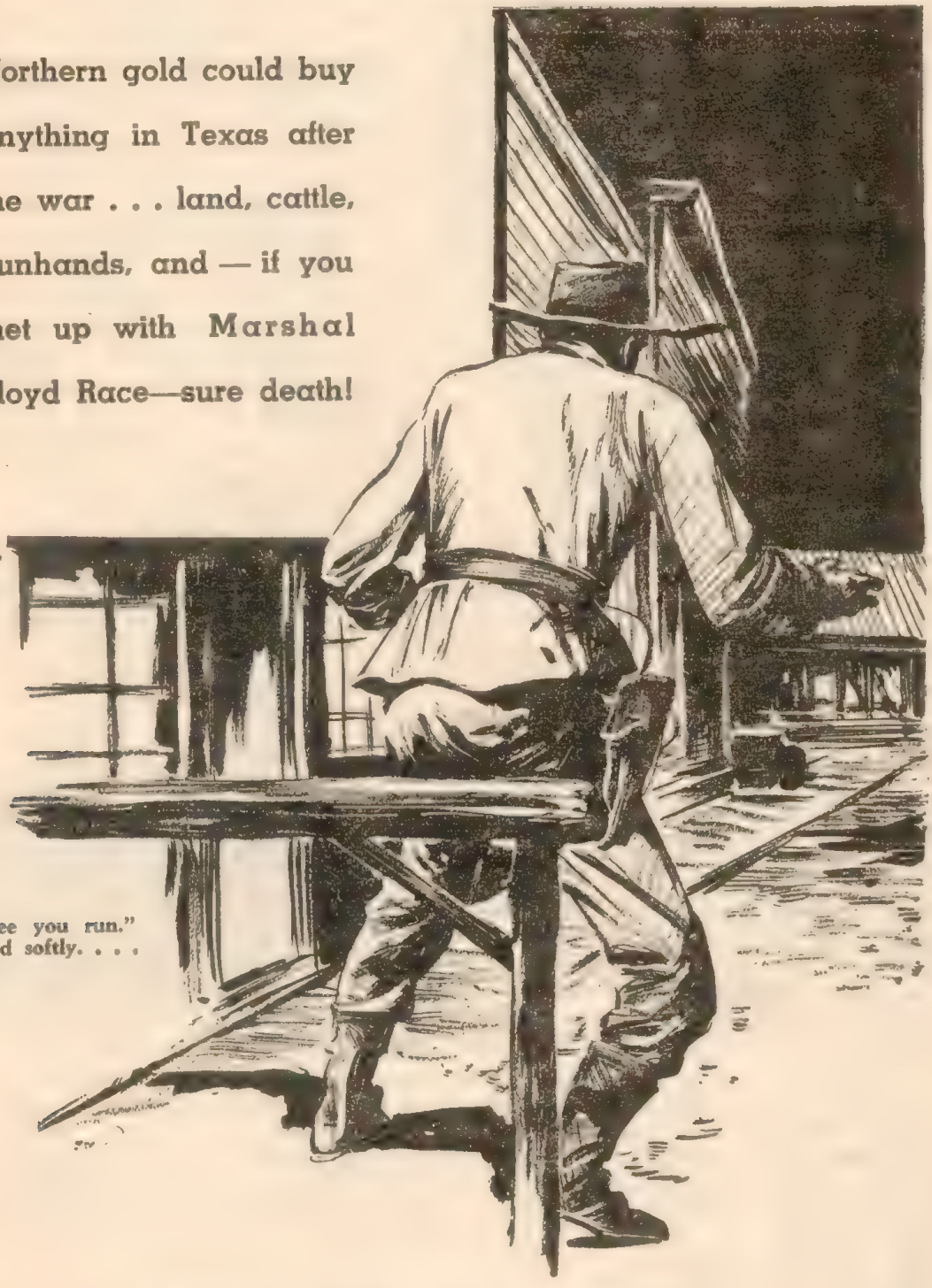
RIDE CLEAR OF

Northern gold could buy anything in Texas after the war . . . land, cattle, gunhands, and — if you met up with Marshal Floyd Race—sure death!

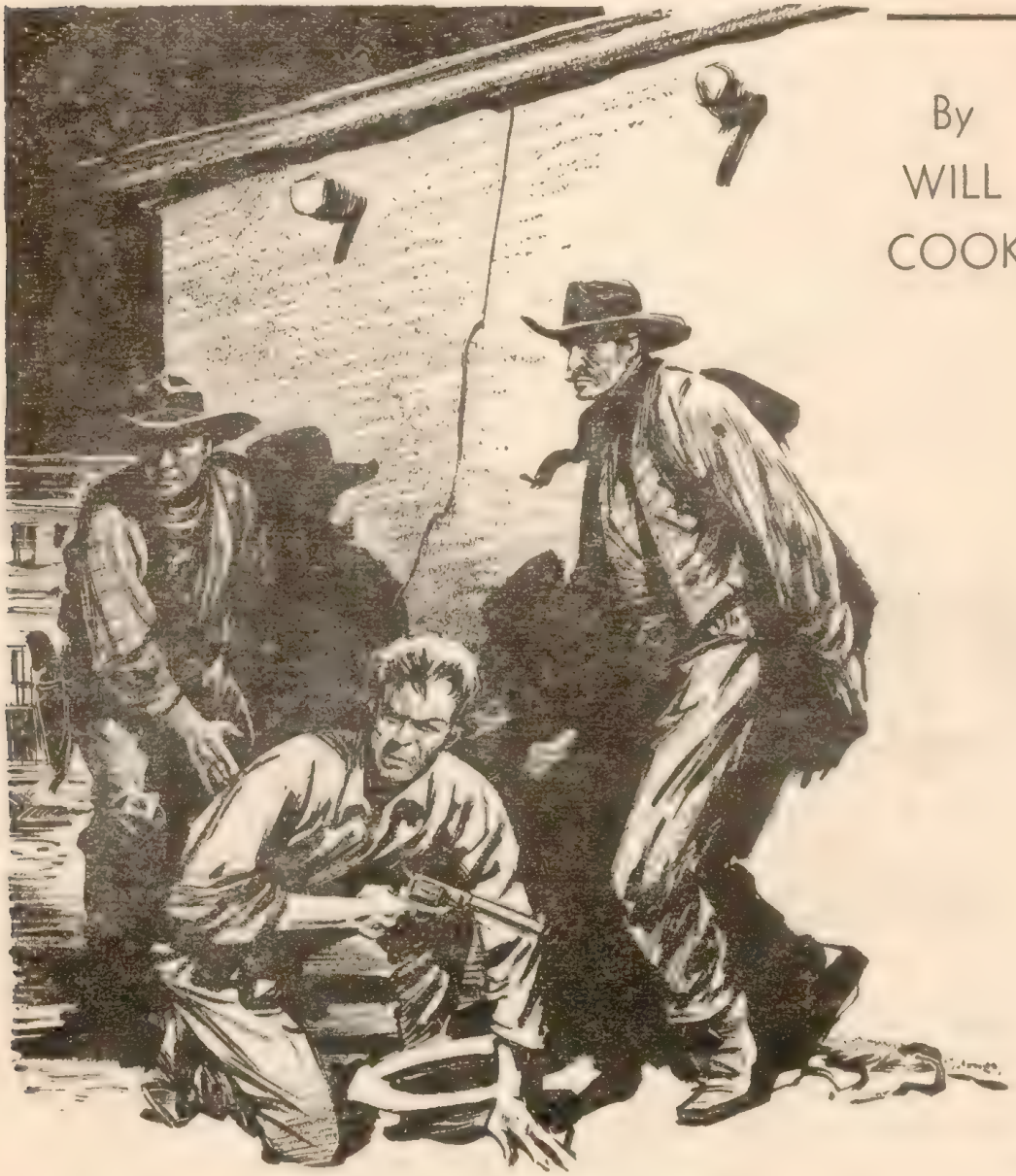


"Let's see you run." Race said softly. . . .

A Blazing Saga of Lone Star Destiny

TEXAS GUNS!

By
WILL
COOK



CONSIDERABLE curiosity was aroused when the workmen arrived in their jerry-wagons and tore down Dundalk's Saloon on the corner of Comanche and Houston Street. A week later, fresh-sawed lumber arrived by way of Abilene and crowds gathered during the daylight hours, talking among themselves; shaking their heads, speculating, but arriving at no definite conclusion.

Across the dusty street and leaning against the wall of Hammerslip's Barber Shop, a tall, ragged man with tobacco-stained whiskers turned to his companion and said, "What ya bet it's gonna be?"

The friend snorted, "Can't bet. I got

nothin' but Confed'rit money and by golly, Yankee dollahs is buildin' that." He spat a stream into the dust and watched the building rear up, first as long uprights, then the joists, cross-braces and fire-blocks.

Workmen swarmed over the framework for a week until it was no longer a framework, but a slab-covered structure with an elaborate gallery stretching across the upper face, the long porch shading the boardwalk below it. Paint was produced and men dangled from the edges of the roof on long ropes, sweating in the Texas sun, adding a pale tan color in long, dripping strokes.

At the end of the month it was finished and other wagons arrived with furniture and knick-knacks and curtains and long, rolled rugs. The ragged man worked the cud of tobacco around in his jaws and said, "Reckon it's a hotel?"

"Naw," his friend replied. "Who'd use it?"

"Dunno," the ragged man murmured. "Still, Hondo's a right lively place and the war's over. The boys'll be traipsin' home most likely."

The friend snorted. "You're loco. What's there to be comin' home to? Land? Cattle runnin' wild that nobody kin catch, or sell even if they caught 'em. I reckon it's a new saloon."

The ragged man shook his head in disagreement. "No saloon I ever seen has them fancy do-dads."

The friend agreed and lapsed into silence.

South of Hondo, the road stretched for miles across the flatness of the desert and now a rider appeared, the dust lifting in a straight column and hanging motionless to mark his passage. He wore gray, a little ragged in spots, and the horse showed hard usage, his ribs thrusting against the skin like corset stays. A saber with a tarnished brass hilt and dented scabbard clattered against his leg; a cavalry pistol nestled against his right hip while another with a shoulder stock dangled from a saddle thong.

He paused for a moment at the end of Comanche Street, letting his eyes run over the dusty length before urging the horse to a tired walk. He was tall in the saddle, lean-flanked with a great mane of yellow hair that reflected the light of the upright sun. An inch of corn-colored stubble covered his cheeks, but the eyes were level and he held himself in with a strong will, evident in the pulled lines that bracketed his mouth. He paused before the new-painted structure, gazed at it in frank admiration, then wheeled the horse before Hammerslip's Barber Shop, and dismounted.

The ragged man straightened from his place along the wall and said, "By God! Floyd Race! We heard you got kilt at Pittsburg Landin'!"

RACE grinned then and crowsfeet bloomed around his eyes. "Not quite, Pack—not quite." He stepped to the boardwalk and stood flatfooted, stretching until his tunic lay tight across his belly like skin across a drumhead. Race nodded toward the new building and said, "Who, around here, has got the money to put up a thing like that?"

Pack Wingert scratched his head and murmured, "Danged if I know, Marshal—I mean Floyd. None of us ever seen th' fellas before; anyhow, they're just carpenters. They don't know nothin'." Race gave the building another inspection and stepped into the barber shop.

Roy Hammerslip stood goggle-eyed for a moment, then spun his red plush chair around and spread a clean towel across the headrest. His long face creased into a broad smile and he said, "Floyd, it's good to have you home."

Race tossed hm a Yankee dollar and settled back in the chair. "The works, Roy, and plenty of that Lilac water."

Hammerslip turned the dollar over in

his hand several times. "I'm gonna take this home and show my Lucinda. We ain't seen a good dollar for nigh onto two months." He began to work a brush furiously in the shaving mug until a thick lather spilled off onto the floor. "You been travelin', Marshal—how is the country?"

"Shot in the pants," Race said. "Nothin' but land and cattle." He halted his talk as the barber wound a hot towel around his face, then the voice came through muffled. "I came through Fort Worth a month ago and I heard that a big Yankee moneyman bought up half the state of Texas."

Hammerslip took his razor from a glassed case. "Texas sure needs money bad. The Yankees have it all, I guess." He stropped the blade vigorously. "You goin' back to marshalin'? We ain't had much law since you been gone."

Race laughed. "I got a skinny horse, two Colt's pistols and nine dollars in Yankee coin. There ain't much else I can do, providin' Sy Oliphant will take me back again."

"He'll take you," Roy said. "He may be the mayor of this here town, but by golly, we get somethin' to say too." The razor moved across the blonde man's face, skirting the upper lip. Race sat up and Hammerslip toweled him dry and applied lotion to his hair.

The front doorway darkened and Pack Wingert's voice was excited. "Marshal—Roy! They're puttin' up a sign!" Race left the chair and went outside. Workmen lifted the sign, a long affair half the length of the upper gallery, nailing it in place while a dozen men held it in position. Large letter proclaimed it *the Headquarters, Texas Land and Cattle Corporation.*

"I'll be go to hell!" Pack said.

"Yankees," Race stated and walked across the street. Sy Oliphant came out of his feed store and stood beside Race, admiring the structure. He was a fat man in a long, frock coat and his voice which went lower when he got excited was heavy with importance. "Mind you now, I ain't no Yankee, but I'm glad to see it. This is the life blood for Texas. Prosperity is just around the corner."

"What's the matter with Texas the way she was before the war?" Race asked bluntly.

Oliphant sputtered. "Dammit now—there ain't nothin' wrong, 'cept she's flat busted. We need new blood, Floyd. We need it bad."

"Like we need another Alamo," Race said. "These Yankees will pass the money around awhile and let folks get the feel of it again, but the money never will stay in Texas like it used to. That kind of prosperity we can do without." He waved a hand at the land. "We have money and it belongs to Texas. It's roamin' the land and it's got four feet. Round 'em up and drive 'em North and Texas won't need no Yankee gold."

Oliphant scrubbed his fat face, not liking the talk. "You're dreamin' again, Floyd. You always was a dreamer. Missouri's a long way off, son. This money's here, because the cattle company will buy the beef right here in Hondo. We won't have to run the risk of a drive."

Race let out a long breath and said, "Mayor, I'd like to have my job back."

"What for?" Oliphant was surprised. "We couldn't pay more'n ten dollars a month now—maybe not that."

"You're gonna need a marshal," Race pointed out and waited until the man turned it over in his mind. He saw the hesitation and added, "There's men like Fred Cardigan, Ackerman and a few others that will get the badge back for me, but I don't want to do it that way."

OLIPHANT nodded and turned, walking a few doors down until he came to his store. Race followed him into the back room that served as his office and Oliphant pinned the badge on the front of Race's tunic. The fat man said, "Some

of the ranchers is gettin' uneasy. There's gonna be a meetin' at Ginsman's today. I thought you'd be interested."

"Thanks," Race said and went out. He turned right and listened to the rap of his boot heels as he walked toward Ginsman's Saloon on the corner.

The room was hot and rancid and a fly droned in aimless circles as if in search of a meal. Ginsman looked up as Race entered, then put his polishing rag aside and reached for a bottle under the bar. "Marshal," he said, "you look as good as ever."

Race poured for himself and lifted the glass. "One on the house, Pete?"

Ginsman shrugged his bony shoulders. "One or four, what difference it makes? Money, we don't have."

"Your health then," Race said and tipped up his glass.

"That I'm having plenty of," Ginsman said and plunged the glass in a tub of luke-warm water, then polished it until it sparkled.

Race watched this and murmured, "Why is it that bartenders are always polishing glasses?"

Ginsman leaned on the bar and grew confidential. "When I came to America, I got a job in Brooklyn. The boss said, 'polish the glasses,' always polish the glasses. One day I came West and I got my own place. Then I say to myself, 'Pete, you are now the boss. No more polishing the glasses.' But habit is a funny thing—I still polish the glasses." He gave Race a long glance and added softly, "Maybe habit got you too, eh?"

"What do you mean by that, Pete?"

Ginsman shrugged again, "Maybe nothing, maybe everything. Before the war when you was the law, you got tough, but you never killed a man. Now you have killed. Maybe now killing a man don't make you sick. Maybe now just to shoot is easier than talk."

"You been drinking your own whisky," Race told him and filled his shot glass again.

"Texas," Ginsman said, "is a great state, but the Yankees hate 'er. She was in the Union once and they counted on her, but she swung to the South. Now the South is bust and Texas is hanging by the neck waitin' for the Yankees to cut her down so she can live again. Maybe this time the Yankees won't take her back into the Union."

"She wouldn't go back in!" Race declared with some heat.

"The South is dead." Ginsman said. He saw Race stiffen and added hurriedly. "Don't get mad now—think. You know it is so. The Union got to take Texas and all the others back. You think they'll do that for nothing?"

"It's a hell of a mess," Race conceded. He shoved the empty glass across the bar and went out to stand in the sunlight. The town of Hondo sat on the fringe of the desert. A few miles away, the land rose until it stood high and bold, full of hidden valleys and the rich grazing land. Race gave his attention to the street. Loungers made a small crowd before the *Texas Land and Cattle* building, talking and wagging their heads.

Out on the flatness, a carriage wheeled toward town, the twisting funnel of dust rising behind it in a dun colored banner. He watched it draw near, then to the foot of the street. The driver drove with a flourish, coming to a rocking halt before the new building.

Floyd Race stepped from the porch and walked a few doors up until he stood on the fringe of it all.

A man dismounted first, tall and stringy and dressed in Eastern finery. A high hat rode evenly above his narrow face and a gold watch chain dangled before his vest, bobbing and catching the light and throwing it back. He turned, lifting his hand for the girl as the driver laid the luggage on the boardwalk and drove away.

The girl gave the gathering crowd a quick glance and her eyes touched Race's, for a moment then dropped away. Her hair was rich and thickly brown; her lashes long over her downcast eyes. Her mouth was full and wistful and Race had the distinct impression that this pomp embarrassed her. She shook her dress to remove the wrinkles while the man gave the crowd a quick inspection. His eyes settled on a shabby man leaning against the hitch rack.

Race politely edged his way through the crowd as the man reached into his vest pocket and tossed a silver dollar in the dust at the shabby man's feet. "Please carry my bags for me," he said, and smiled when the man stared at the money.

Race crossed over quietly and put his boot on it. He said, "Move on now, Ben—get along." The man looked shamefaced, then turned and shouldered his way through the crowd.

Race bent and picked the coin up and flipped it. It rang when it hit the walk and bounced against the man's leg. Race said, "If you want to purchase a service, sir, hand the gentleman the coin. They'll oblige you."

The man detached himself from the girl. He gave the tattered uniform a close inspection and a smile played on the corners of his mouth as his eyes touched the star. He wore sideburns and a Van Dyke and his eyes were sharp and clear beneath straight brows. "That was a good dollar," the man said.

"I have no doubt of it, sir," Race drawled the words. "But we are not Northerners. We are poor, but we expect respect, even from a Yankee."

THE man's face clouded and he extracted a cigar from an inner pocket, collecting his temper while he ignited it. Men stood in a loose cluster around them, taking this in. The girl remained still, with that unreadable expression, and when Race glanced at her, he thought he saw a spark of interest in her eyes. "My name is Thaddeus Eastman," the man stated. "I'd like a word with you."

Race smiled and murmured, "At your service. I'm the marshal—Floyd Race."

Eastman fidgeted and said softly, half-savagely, "Not here, man. Come in with me."

Race was on the edge of telling the man to go to the devil when the girl moved close to him and asked, "Would you carry my bag, sir?"

"Ma'am," he said, drawing the 'a' out in a clear, southern drawl, "my pleasure." She smiled then and he lifted her valise. Thaddeus Eastman scowled and Race said to him, "That's a good dollar. A shame to let it lay there."

Color climbed in the man's face and his voice was chopped. "Let it lay. It won't stay long after you're gone."

Race laughed, "Sir, a Texan never accepts money unless he earns it." He glanced at the girl and saw that he had been mistaken about her eyes. They were a slate gray and the boldness rose for a moment before she covered it with her long lashes. He sensed the will and her courage and the placid lips that lay full told him of the fire that burned within her. Race glanced at the dollar, lying bright and new in the sun and Eastman spun on his heel, marching into the building with sharp, angry steps.

They passed through the main floor and up a long flight of steps that doubled back before coming out into the living quarters on the second floor. The man hurried ahead to open doors and the girl stopped, facing Race and murmured, "You're very gallant and very, very foolish." She said no more. Thaddeus Eastman thrust his head past the edge of a door and said, "In here."

It was an elegant room, richly furnished. "Put the bags down there," Eastman ordered and crossed to the window. Race deposited them in a corner, contrary to

directions and turned to leave. "Just a moment!" Eastman spun around, a fine-honed temper in his eyes. "I find your manner insufferable, Marshal."

"Now," Race said gently, "that's just how I felt about you." He studied the lavishness of the room. "Mighty nice," he commented. "I wonder how many poor folks lost their shirt payin' for it." He turned his eyes on Eastman and they were without tolerance or friendliness. "I was in Memphis and Nashville and Chattanooga. Them carpetbaggers done the same as you done outside—took one look and figured they'd be so all-fired crazy for a dollar that they'd forget what they fought a war for." He gave the girl a smile, "You'll pardon me, ma'am. I meant nothin' personal."

Eastman's temper was a live thing, but time had given him the will to control it. He said. "We won't get anywhere snapping at each other's throats. This is my daughter, Eleanor. Take a good look at her and forget her—because if I see you speaking to her again, I'll have you horsewhipped."

"It's been my observation," Race said, "that in a strange country a man'd best walk careful before he stepped in somethin' that wouldn't scrape off." He glanced at Eleanor and she returned his appraisal and that bold thing was in her eyes, clear and calling to him. He crossed to her and murmured. "Texas is a purty place, if the Yankees don't spoil it first. I'd like to show some of it to you."

She smiled and glanced past the marshal to her father. Eastman's face was a deep scowl of disapproval. Her laugh was a low ringing and she said, "He's called your bluff." He turned back toward the window, puffing on his cigar. She said, "Tomorrow at ten?"

"At ten," Race agreed, then Thaddeus Eastman's voice swung him around.

"You're rude, impertinent, and daring —or you don't give a damn. Either way, I can use a man like you." Race shook his head. "Don't be a fool," Eastman continued. "You're too smart to ride a dead horse. I'm here to save the state of Texas."

Race raised an eyebrow as if the man had said he would wave his arms and fly around the room. Eastman flushed and added, "I poured two million dollars into the treasury at Austin when the state of Texas didn't have a nickle. I bought the land and everything that's on it—even the Texans themselves. I call that saving Texas."

"Or strangling it," Race said. "We may be rebels, but we ain't fools, sir. No man spends a fortune just to be spendin' it. The land ain't worth anything unless you can develop it. That would take another fortune, so you must be after the cattle."

"You read minds too," Eastman asked.

"No," Race said. "But there ain't nothin' left but land and cattle—and Texans."

Eastman was pleased. He grinned and puffed his cigar. "By golly," he said. "You have a brain beneath that temper. I mean it. I can see a man like you."

"I disagree," Race put in. "Not with the job, but your word choice, sir. You don't want to hire me—you want to use me. That's why you are bad for Texas. It means nothing to you, just a speculation to make more money. You don't want to develop the land over the years. You want to exploit her for her beef, then when your money is safe in a Yankee bank, give her back to the Comanches and let her blow away."

EASTMAN frowned and glanced at his daughter. She regarded Race openly, as if she was holding him up to the light of her judgment and measuring him. It didn't make him feel uncomfortable. Eastman's scowl deepened, and he said, "Listen to me, Race. I'm going to build the biggest empire man has ever seen. Millions of acres. Whole towns that belong to me.

One rule, one domain and prosperity for everyone. I need men and families to work the land. These Texans needn't move on. They can work for me. I'll keep them in food and clothing and pay them. Not dollars of course, but script issued in my name and redeemable at my stores."

"I wouldn't touch it with the end of a whip," Race told him. He turned then, as if to make for the door and Eleanor stepped in front of him, blocking him as surely as if she had built a barrier.

"Please," she said softly. "Northern money is bound to come. Let Father be the one to supply it. You can be a great help to him."

Race turned the words over in his head, feeling that there was something there that eluded him. It cooled his anger as a bucket of water quenches a rifle barrel, but it left his hard, Southern pride. "I'm sorry to hear you say that. I have what I believe, nothing else. However, I will give it thought and let you know tonight." He walked around her to the door and paused with his hand on the latch. "Eastman, you think you know men, but you don't know Texans. I do. Look out that window and if that silver dollar is gone—a Texan picked it up. Then I'll turn in this badge and come on your side."

Thaddeus Eastman stared at him for a moment then looked out of the window. He turned and the lines around his mouth were still drawn with displeasure. "It's still there," he said, and turned to pour himself a drink.

Race smiled at the girl and murmured, "I'll see you tonight." He went down the hall and the zig-zag steps and out into the sunlight. Across the street by the barber shop, two horsemen dismounted by the hitching post. A buckboard wheeled into town, old Amos Ackerman driving gaunt and straight. He gave Race a curt nod and wheeled in along side the two riders. Race left the porch and crossed the street. Both men were tall with the same reddish-brown hair; the older man sported a drooping mustache. Race punched the old man in the ribs and said, "Whatcha doin' staggerin' around drunk."

The young one spun first, the older man a little slower. Then there was laughter and name calling and Race broke away from the back pounding. "A drink," he said. "For old times sake." Amos Ackerman had dismounted and was mounting the porch of Ginsman's saloon.

"Ain't nothin' else to drink to anymore," Fred Cardigan said. They cut back to the boardwalk and entered Ginsman's Saloon. Ackerman had found a table along the wall and nursed his whisky in solitude.

Fred Cardigan and his son bellied against the bar, and Fred ordered in a loud voice. Glasses slid along the bar, the bottle tipped and Fred grew red in the face. Ginsman saw this and said, "On the house. Let's all be neighbors."

"Sure," Fred said and they lifted their glasses. Wes Cardigan leaned against the bar as if he had a great deal of time on his hands. His clothes were faded and much patched, but his pale eyes held a strong Texas pride. Ginsman switched his dark eyes between them and murmured, "Now nobody sleeps—you two together again."

Race traced a design on the bar. "Not the same now, Pete. Four years have paraded by. Times have changed, even Wes, here, has changed." Race dropped his eyes to the cap and ball Colt riding the boy's hip. Fred was armed with his huge .44 Dragoon, an unusual thing. Race nudged the older man and said, "I think Amos is waitin' for you. Let's go sit down."

There was a moment's scraping as chairs were pulled into position; glasses clinked when Fred set them on the table. Amos shot Race a quick glance and the marshal said" "You're lookin' fine, Amos."

Ackerman snorted sourly. "Ain't doin' fine though," and refilled his glass.

"Things a little tight in Sunrise, Fred?"

Cardigan made a disgusted motion with his hand. "We're cattle rich and flat broke. By my count, we got three thousand head scattered from Mix canyon to the breaks and beef's sellin' for three dollars a head in Missouri. I don't know what the hell to do."

"Drive 'em," Ackerman said.

"Drive, hell!" Fred exclaimed. "There's carpetbaggers and jayhawkers that'll steal the whole herd. To hell with it. Things can never get so tough that I can't dig up some potatoes and butcher some of my own beef. Our knees might grow through our pants but we won't starve. And we have the land."

"That's what you think," Race said and told them about the *Texas Land and Cattle Corporation.* Cardigan and Ackerman sat in thoughtful silence after the marshal had finished.

"I heerd rumors that some Yankee had bought up a whole passel of land," Fred said. Didn't seem logical that it'd work, though. Too many folks to move off and a lot of 'em that wouldn't move—like me."

Ackerman pushed his glass aside and folded his long hands. "This Yankee ain't gonna move anybody. He ain't even gonna try. Now none of us would work for him or take one of his damn dollars, but there's trash here that would. If he buys beef, they's some here that'll sell. Them trash will ruin Texas unless we stop 'em."

Race gave it some thought, then said, "I agree with Amos. People change and money gets like a god when you ain't got any. Men'll switch sides. Look for it and you won't get hurt."

"Nobody's worried about gettin' hurt," Fred said. "We just want to keep Texas money in Texas."

"Then drive a herd North," Ackerman said stubbornly.

Race said, "Eastman offered me a job. I got an idea he wants me to keep the peace for him—his rules, of course."

"Might be a good idea if you took it," Ackerman said. "Ain't no law says you gotta keep it if you don't like it. I don't wanta see Texas go to the Yankees, but I'll be switched if I know what to do about it."

"I don't want to see you mixed up with him," Fred Cardigan said.

"Don't worry about it," Race said, and walked out of Ginsmans. He paused on the boardwalk and surveyed Hondo. As a town it had little of which it could boast. Comanche Street was a dusty track splitting the false-fronted business houses. The cross streets like Cherry and Winecup and Sycamore led to the scattered residences backed against the desert's edge. Now it was a dead town, a thousand miles from the fringe of the war, but suffering in the aftermath as much as Nashville and Richmond. Floyd Race crossed to the empty veranda of the hotel, found himself a seat in the shade and studied the problem with his feet on the railing.

CHAPTER TWO

Race's Bargain

THE sun was a dead thing, and lamplight sparkled as Ginsman lighted his lamps for another poor evening. During the afternoon, three men had ridden in, tying their horses before the Cattle headquarters. Townsmen made a great deal over this and rumors ran wild up and down the street.

The downstairs portion of the new building was sparsely lighted, but the upstairs windows were bright. Race waited for full darkness, then rose and crossed the street. He navigated the back-tracking stairs and walked down the lighted hall. He knocked on Thaddeus Eastman's door. The low talk was broken off suddenly and the door swung wide. Eastman motioned him into the room and nodded to the three men. They filed out, giving Race long glances.

Eastman waved the tall man into a chair and said, "I take it that you are going to accept?"

"Make me an offer," Race told him.

The man smiled, as though he had achieved a small victory. "All right, Race. I'll back that badge you're wearing."

"It don't need backing," Race said.

"That is debatable, Marshal. I own this land you walk on. I have a right to make the laws." He broke off his talk as the door opened and Eleanor came into the room. Eastman looked annoyed. "Not now, my dear—I'm very busy."

She gave Race a pale smile and sat down in a large chair. She wore a pale yellow dress and her body filled its flowing lines. Thaddeus Eastman showed his irritation. He said, "I'm not against the Texans, Race. I'm not against anyone. I just want to protect my investment, that's all." He paused to light his cigar and added, "Look at it this way, Race. You are wearing the badge now. All right, then help me keep the peace. I don't want these people fighting among themselves."

Race thought about it, then said, "A deal, but I got a free rein, understand?"

Eastman nodded, pleased with himself. "Let's have a drink on it." He turned and poured two glasses of wine.

Eleanor came out of her chair. She took the marshal's hand and murmured, "Thank you. It's the way I wanted it." There was still that tone in her voice that troubled Race. He didn't understand it. She gave him the impression that she was laughing at her father in a silent, relentless way.

He said, "It's pretty simple. I'm broke. We're all broke. It was a question of money, money, who's got the money."

The light faded in her eyes and she said in a small voice, "I see," and turned back to her chair. She left her disappointment with him.

Thaddeus Eastman chuckled. "Eleanor sometimes disapproves of my methods, but it's a man's world and we have to play by a man's rules. No room for softness."

"Just what are your methods?"

"Get 'em where the hair is short and hang on once you get 'em! These people are broke. They need money for everything. All right, I'll give them money, but first, I want their beef. Those three men who just left here are going to supervise the building of a holding corral south of town. I want you to spread the word around that I'll pay a dollar a head for beef. Cold cash. Good Yankee dollars, as you put it."

"Pretty poor price" Race murmured. "They can get three times that in Missouri."

"But can they drive them there?" Eastman was smiling broadly. "That's the rub, Race. I have them on the hip now. I can get through, I'm sure of it, and I need a big herd. Once I get through, the Texans will try to follow, but it will be too late."

"Father is worried, Floyd," Eleanor said. "If a Texan beat him with a herd, then every other Texan would follow him. It gives him nightmares to think of it—holding the sack. Millions of acres of land and not a steer on it." Her eyes held a strong light of excitement.

THE man scowled. "Understand this, Marshal—a man may win the game by a nose, but it's still winning. I'm not fool enough to believe that any man could take the cattle away from these people. It would take an army of men and eat up all of the profits. The people must be lulled with money, ready cash, and I know of no sweeter song. It will buy us time to build up our forces."

"You're balanced on a pretty slim pole," Race told him. "That dollar is still layin' in the street. Remember that."

Eastman slapped his thighs in disgust and poured another glass of port. "Dammit, man, I can tell when the ice is thin! I'll win this thing if I play it careful!"

Eleanor laughed, a soft musical sound.

"Father is a genius, Floyd. He leaves nothing to chance." She stood up suddenly. "Walk with me. I've been cooped up since we arrived."

He shot her father a quick glance, suddenly aware of that subtle tone and what it meant. It was defiance. Race said, "You'll excuse us, sir?" He drawled it, reverting back to the Tennessee from which he had sprung.

Eastman's temper, so rigidly controlled, kicked up at the fringes, and he said, "You're cocky, Race. You like to do the very things you were warned not to do. Remember this, because if you step out of line, you can always be taken care of."

"Thank you for the warnin'," Race said and took the girl's arm.

Hondo held little activity at this early hour; a few stores stood open but the shelves sported large gaps in the stock. Race said, "Not much to walk to around here."

She laughed at his seriousness. "There's the moon and the whole state of Texas. What more could a girl want?"

"I don't understand you," Race admitted. They came to Sycamore Street and he put a little pressure on her arm, turning her into the darkness. They walked in silence until they came to the split-log bench. Above them, the squat branches blotted out the night light. She sat down with a soft rustling of her dress; Race lighted a cigar, his face bold and bright in the momentary flare of the match.

"You, I think, are the most stubborn man I have ever met."

Race was startled. "I don't know if I should laugh at the things you say, or worry about 'em."

"I'm a very serious person," Eleanor told him. "I think I've forgotten how to really laugh." She touched his hand and he sat beside her. "Do you want to know why father wanted you under his thumb? He's afraid of you. You're the kind of a man will reason, up to a point, then pull your gun and shoot the opposition down."

Race knocked the ashes from his smoke and murmured, "The man's dream's too big. Texas will never kneel to any one man, or a group of men. We been fightin' for what we wanted for thirty years. Texans are good at it."

Eleanor's voice was cool and soft. "If he gathers a trail herd, he will bring her to her knees."

There was a dry wait, then Race said, "Somehow, I keep gettin' the feelin' that you want him to lose his shirt."

"Yes," she said. "It's a dream of mine. It would mean a great deal to me."

"Strange thoughts for a man's daughter to have."

"Not strange at all—practical is the word." She folded her hands in her lap; she made a faint, white blur to him in the night, but her warmth was real. It had its effect on him. "Once we lived on a quiet street and had a lot of friends, but then father made some money and we had to move to a better street. It was a very proper house on a proper street and all of our new friends had a lot of money and they were very proper. He was no longer 'dad'—he was father, and money was no longer money—it was arrogance and snobbery and wild dreams of more money. Somewhere along there I lost him. Now I want him back. Broke, if that's the only way I can get him."

Race drew on his cigar. The red end glowed and died and glowed again "Licking a man sometimes does more harm than good," he opined. "Your father may win —then again, he may not, but the pastin' of his life won't drive truth into him. He's gotta see this for himself, or it won't do any good."

She stood up, close to him. Her oval face white and fine in the faint light. "I know what you want, Floyd—a Texas trail herd. I know that you'll fight for it, but remember, he has never lost. I put my faith in you because you're like Texas

—wild and free and have never known a master's mind. I envy you for that freedom."

"If you were my daughter," Race told her, "I think I'd bend you over my knee." He took her arm and the flesh was warm and soft beneath his hand. He pulled her to him and their lips met for a long moment.

She broke away, and said. "You see—I'm not a proper woman after all." She smiled and they turned, retracing their way back to the new building on Comanche Street.

The three men who had been in Eastman's office lounged on the porch. Race paused on the steps with Eleanor, gave them a long, pointed glance and they moved away, crossing the half-dark street.

ELEANOR said, "It's been a nice talk." She blushed under his level gaze, and murmured, "About that—let me think."

"I meant it in all seriousness," Race told her.

"I know that," she said. "That's why I must think. Good night." She turned and entered the building. He waited until he heard an upstairs door close, then crossed the street.

The three men sagged against the wall of a vacant building. One of them came alert as Race ducked under the hitchrack. He stopped as the man said, "I'm Buck Allbeck, Marshall—your new deputy."

"I don't need one," Race said and took a step away.

Allbeck's heavy hand fastened in the gray tunic and he snapped, "Hold on there, Reb. I ain't through talkin'!"

"The hell you ain't." Race said and whirled, knocking the man into his companions. A heavy man cursed and fell, trying to get aside. Allbeck shook his head and tried to sit up. The blow had been sudden and wicked, but it only stunned him and he tried to draw the revolver tucked in the waistband of his jeans. Race lifted a boot and kicked him full in the face. Allbeck's head went back, bouncing against the unpainted wall and he rolled off the boardwalk into the dust. Race picked up the fallen gun and said, "You two my deputies also?"

One of the men nodded. "I'm Ott. This is Giles White." He jerked a thumb toward the heavy man Allbeck had cascaded into.

"Let's see you run," Race said softly.

Jake Ott's mouth fell open and he said, "Huh?"

"Run!" Race repeated and eared the hammer back on the Navy Colt, shooting into the boardwalk between them. Giles White let out a hoarse bleat and shoved his bulk into motion, almost knocking Ott down in his hurry to escape. Race shot again, into the building this time, driving them away from the wall and into the street. There was little light and they made vague, bobbing shapes as they ran down the strip of dust. Race emptied the gun after them, shooting into the ground to produce snarling ricochets. He turned to a heavy iron ring imbedded in the end of a hitching post and hammered the Colt against it until the cylinder pin snapped and the barrel fell into the dirt.

He threw the cylinder and frame far out into the street as Allbeck sat up. The shooting had attracted some attention: Pete Ginsman stood on the veranda of his saloon. Ackerman tall and thin beside him. Thaddeus Eastman leaned on his upper gallery, his face hard and unreadable. Race raised his eyes to Eleanor's window in time to catch the movement of the curtain, as if she had watched and had just turned away.

Allbeck moaned and held his face with cupped hands. Race fisted a handful of his shirt and pulled him to his feet. The man's face was puffed and bleeding and Race said, "Don't ever get in my way, understand?"

He nodded dumbly and the marshal shoved him toward the street. The hitchrail caught him below the belt line and Allbeck

described a parabola to lay moaning in the dust. Fred Cardigan and his son had come onto the saloon porch to stand beside Ackerman. Floyd Race walked toward them with his easy long-legged strides.

Ginsman waited until the batwings stopped swinging and he was secure behind his bar, then said, "See—sometimes it is easier to shoot, eh?"

Race shot a lopsided grin at him and took the bottle, crossing to a table. The Cardigans and Ackerman followed him. Race said, "I made a good guess. He wanted to make his rules stick."

Fred Cardigan lifted an eyebrow. Wes said, "Was that official out there or were you just passin' time?"

"Recreation," Race admitted. He poured a shot glass full and rolled it between his fingers. "Eastman wants the cattle all right. Spread the word around that he's paying a dollar a head right here in Hondo. He's gonna build a loadin' pen south."

"I'll be damned," Ackerman said. "That's as bad as grave robbin'. Them steers'll bring three dollars in Missouri."

"They ain't in Missouri," Race pointed out. "They're here in Texas and nobody's drove north." He raised his eyes and locked them with Fred Cardigan's. "You got guts enough to take a herd north?"

CARDIGAN flushed and murmured, "That's puttin' it a little blunt, Floyd!"

"You either have or you haven't," Race insisted. "It's just as simple as that."

Cardigan toyed with his glass and muttered, "I reckon I ain't."

"Then what are we worried about," Race said. "Eastman won before he ever left Chicago. He figured the Texans was bluff and brag. He counted on it. Back East they're cryin' for beef, but it's here and it'll stay here. If you want to sell, take it to Thad Eastman, the man with vision. He'll give you a dollar a head for it."

"Hell," Wes said. "If we don't drive, then how can he?"

"He'll drive," Race said positively. "He may be a Yankee but he's got guts."

"I don't like that kind of talk," Wes said hotly. "Tellin' me that a Yankee's got more guts than I got."

"Then take a walk for yourself," Race said. "Look the facts in the face. You never tried a drive—you don't know what you can or can't do."

The Cardigans watched Race with a narrow eyed interest. Amos Ackerman said softly, "You changed, Race—tougher, maybe, no—it's more than that. You put your number on a card before and played it out to the thin end. You ain't afraid to do it again."

"I heard of a fella," Wes said. "Over in the Palo Pintos, named Goodnight. He's been all through the Staked Plain's country. He's been talkin' about takin' a herd through, but he ain't got no herd."

"Get him," Race said. "Bring him to the ranch and we'll give him a herd."

"No hurry," Fred said cautiously.

"The hell there ain't!" Race said. "Right now a dollar is gonna look mighty good to some people. Eastman has those dollars, but he's sittin' on a powder keg. He's gotta have steers. He can't round 'em up hisself. The only answer is them people bringin' 'em in. He fears a drive because he knows if one herd got through, they'd all start."

Fred Cardigan rolled it around in his mind for a moment then said to his son, "Get on thet bangtail and fog it." Wes nodded and left his chair and a moment later the sounds of his running horse drifted back. "We'll start a roundup in the mornin'," Fred said.

Ackerman toyed with his drink and said, "Seems like makin' the peace is gonna pinch in spots, Race."

"How so?"

"Eastman knows folks, I reckon. He knows their greeds and their wants. I guess he knows us die-hards too. He'll play us against each other, and you end up fightin' us both."

"I don't follow you," Race said.

"Look at it this way," Ackerman said. "If we're gonna get through with a herd, we need men, men that believe in Texas. Now we ain't gonna get them men if he spreads a little money around and stirs up a lot of discontent. He's got you, son—right where the hair is short. You gotta keep th' peace for him, gotta keep 'em from fightin' their neighbor. If Texans ever get to fightin' among themselves—then all hell won't stop 'em. While you're doin' this, you'll be helpin' us, but you'll be helpin' him too. He's countin' on you helpin' him more."

"That Yankee buzzard!" Race said.

"They all are," Ackerman said and stood up. Race knew there was nothing more to say, so murmured good night and left.

Thaddeus Eastman still stood on his porch and lifted a beckoning hand as Race stepped from the saloon. He made a flanking movement and halted, lifting his head to give Eastman a bold stare. "You play rough, Marshal. Allbeck is a good man."

"He's poor white trash," Race contradicted. "If he was a man he wouldn't have folded after one poke in the nose."

"I wish I had your brutality," Eastman said. "I'd be a king."

"Then you'd want to be God," Race told him.

The man's eyes widened, then he smiled, and said, "Come on in. I have a room made up for you." Race followed him into the building and up the stairs to a room at the far end of the hall. Eastman opened the door for him, then stopped him as Race went to shoulder by. "One more thing, Marshal. My daughter is just twenty and, I'm afraid, impressionable. I have tolerated her attraction to you because there are no young men here that I deem suitable for her company. You are the lesser of the evils. Just remember who you are and who she is, and I'll tell you when she has had enough of you."

Race felt his temper slip and the blood climbed into his face. Eastman saw this, but nodded curtly and closed the door. Race crossed to the window and threw it open, letting the cool night air calm him. Pete Ginsman left his saloon and crossed to Race's horse, leading him away.

Race went over to the bed and sat down, stripping off his tunic and his boots. These he placed neatly by the chair. The sounds of the town died gradually for there was little activity. Below him, a door slammed, then total quiet. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Hell Hits Hondo!

FOR a month, Hondo rolled in a mild wave of prosperity. Men drove cattle in by the dozens, then small herds. Fights broke out with shocking regularity and Race parted them, arresting some, turning others free to fight again. Factions were forming: those who took Yankee money, and those who refused to take it. This worried Race. The rapidly filling loading pens worried him. Wes Cardigan worried him. He had been gone a month and no word had been received, while daily, Eastman's trail herd grew.

It meant business for the town, Race admitted it. Men who had their hair cut once a month now took their ease in Hammerslip's barber chair for a shave twice a week. Race took to lounging on the Cattle Company porch, his chair tipped back against the wall, his hat pulled low over his eyes. He was like this when Allbeck came out, his face completely healed, touched Race on the arm and said, "The boss wants to see you right away."

Race uncoiled his length from his chair and went up the steps. Eastman answered his knock and Race stepped inside, closing the door after him. He motioned Race into a chair then took a bundle of notes and tossed them in the marshal's lap. "What do you think of these?"

Race broke the band and scanned them. He threw them on the desk, and said, "Not worth the paper they're written on. You caught a few flies at a dollar a head, but they'll throw this stuff in your face."

Eastman flushed and snapped, "By God, I stand behind this paper. It's as good as a dollar in my store!"

"I don't doubt it." Race agreed. "You bought danged near every business in town. You got them used to the idea of havin' money. Now you take the money away and issue this junk, hopin' they'll take it. What you don't realize is that these Texans were stretching a point just to do a cash business with you in the first place. They won't stretch this far, Eastman."

"The essence of business," Eastman stated, "is where a man takes a dollar and passes it around, getting a little of it to stick to him every time he touches it." Eastman chuckled and snipped the end from a cigar. "Jake Ott was telling me that young Cardigan went to Palo Pinto county after Charlie Goodnight." He studied Race for a long moment, then the pleasantness vanished. "You're through, Race. I don't like double dealers. Give your badge to Allbeck and leave the country."

Race shook his head. "Not a chance. There's some folks around here that like my bein' marshal. If Allbeck thinks he's man enough, then let him come after the badge."

"I have too much to lose to fool around with you," Eastman said. "This is a rough game, Race. Maybe it looks tame, but I have a lot at stake and I don't intend to lose it because some die-hard rebel wants to get patriotic."

"Law's a funny thing," Race pointed out. "No matter who appoints it, it's no good unless the people recognize it."

The man's face grew long and tense and he said tightly. "I'm thinking of my daughter, Race. She likes you and there doesn't seem to be much I can do about it. I don't want to turn Allbeck loose. Get some sense, man, and pull out. Quick."

Race stood up and moved toward the door, indicating that the talk was at an end. He turned and said, "You're scared, Eastman. Goodnight worries you. I worry you. You need more time, another month, maybe. Don't sic your toughs on me, Eastman. I'll give you a war you'll never forget."

He closed the door behind him and went down the stairs. Allbeck and Ott lingered by the door, and Race said, "I think Eastman's got a proposition for you." Both men gave him a puzzled stare, then went into the building. Race walked toward the stable at the end of the street. He came out ten minutes later with his horse and noticed White on the porch. Allbeck and Ott came out then and they conversed in low tones. Eleanor Eastman stepped out then, saw Race and waved at him. He nudged the horse with his heels and halted by the bottom step.

Eleanor knew what the men were standing there for and deliberately moved in front of them. She smiled and said, "I'm ready for a ride if you are." Allbeck cursed and went into the building.

Pack Wengert lounged by Hammerslip's striped barber pole and Race motioned for him. "Pack, go get Miss Eastman's horse and bring it here, saddled." The man nodded and trotted toward the stable.

White and Ott continued to stare, both undecided and unable to act without orders. Eleanor turned to them, then said to Race, "We could walk down the street."

"Might as well wait here," Race murmured and listened as a door slammed upstairs and Allbeck's heavy steps came through the foyer and back onto the porch. Thaddeus Eastman paused in the doorway behind Allbeck and said, "Eleanor, go to your room."

The girl made no move and Race shifted his weight in the saddle, his hand on the pommel a scant inch from the shoulder-stocked Colt dangling by a rawhide thong.

"Get back upstairs," Eastman repeated.

"I'm going riding." She made no attempt to hide her defiance and it pushed color into Eastman's face.

"Not today," he said. "We have business with Race and you're interfering."

PACK WINGERT came up with Eleanor's horse and she moved off the porch before anyone could stop her. Pack gave her a hand up into the side saddle.

"I gave you a chance," Eastman said softly.

"Leave her alone," Race said. He dropped his hand to his dangling gun and covered the three armed men. "Now don't anybody get rash." The muzzle of the .44 held them motionless. "We're leavin' now." He reached over with his left hand and drew his other Colt from the flap holster, tossing it to Pack Wingert.

"You know how to shoot a man if he moves, Pack?"

"Damned right," the ragged man said and eared the hammer back.

Eastman let out a long breath and made a motion to Allbeck. "Race, said stay put." Pack warned, and the three men relaxed. Eastman said, "There'll be another time, Race."

"Don't stretch your luck," Race told him. "The only reason your playmates ain't dead is because Eleanor's here. Some other time, though, huh?"

"Your friend Goodnight's a wild shot in the dark," Eastman said and laughed. "Ask Eleanor. We contacted him three months ago to trail this herd and he said no man could get through the Staked Plains with cattle."

It was like a sudden blow to the stomach to Race and he knew it showed when Eastman smiled. He shot a quick look at Eleanor and she murmured, "He's telling the truth, Floyd. Goodnight said "no'."

"I gotta hear that myself," Race said and they backed their horses into the street. Eastman glared at his daughter, then his face broke into a grudging smile. "You're a contrary filly—just like your mother." He turned then and re-entered the building. Race and the girl rode out of town.

They took the road leading into the badlands and an hour later the desert lay below them; Hondo was a rough group of buildings at its edge. Eleanor broke the silence. "Father is afraid of you. You knew that, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid of him," Race admitted. "That makes us even."

"But of different things," Eleanor said. "You're afraid of what his money will do to a money poor country. He's afraid because he knows you could kill a man—maybe him."

"No," he said. "I could never do that and you know why."

She gave him a sad smile. "I'm sorry for you and I'm sorry for him. If you do get a herd through and show the people that Texas is not whipped, it won't mean immediate prosperity. It takes a long time for a land to build itself when it has been destroyed economically. Then again, if he wins, it will bloom for a year and die on the vine. You see, in winning you invite a bigger fight than father's money could ever give you."

He said, "You're a lovely woman and a very wise one. I could use some of that wisdom." He said nothing more, and they climbed, following the faint road into the deep valley that was Cardigan's Sunrise ranch. The scattered buildings lay on the valley foot, Race moved toward them, the girl on his right.

Her eyes were wise and smiling when she said, "I heard a man go into your room late last night. You think Goodnight is here?"

"He's here," Race said, and urged the horse into a trot. Fred Cardigan came onto the porch as they rode into yard. Wes emerged from the barn and trotted across the loose dust. Race dismounted and handed her from her side-saddle and they

went into the house without speaking.

Charles Goodnight rose as they entered. He was not a tall man but ran to big bones and heavy muscle. He wore a full, dark beard and Race thought he had the most piercing eyes he had ever seen. He had will and the courage to back it up, that much was written in the heavy angles of his face. He was young, near thirty, but he had that power over men that commanded immediate respect.

Goodnight saw the girl then and he smiled, although his face showed surprise. "Miss Eastman, it's good to see you again, although I hardly expected to see you."

Race watched as Eleanor took the man's hand and said, "Floyd and I are working for the same end, although for different reasons. I must confess that of the two, mine is the more selfish. I'm working for the salvation of one man—he's working for a great state."

Goodnight displayed his bluntness then, "You want to drive north?"

"Got to," Race said. "The longer we wait, the more money is poured in through Eastman. Pretty soon, there'll be money in Texas and they won't want to drive. They gotta be stone broke to take the risk."

"Suppose I say 'yes'," Goodnight said. "Where do I drive to?"

"I'll leave it up to you," Race told him. "You know the country."

"What's in it for me?"

"Who knows?" Race said. "Immortality? Death? It's a big gamble."

GOODNIGHT smiled then and lighted a cigar. He let out a cloud of smoke and said, "Race, you're a dreamer—and, I hope, a fighter, because Texas needs both badly right now. All right, I'll take the herd through. Can you gather three thousand head?"

"They're gathered," Fred Cardigan put in. "We been workin' for a month—me'n my riders."

"Fine," Goodnight said. "I understand that the Apache agent at the reservation on the Pecos is payin' eight cents a pound. Fort Sumner is a hell of a long ways away and there's Comanche and rivers and God knows what all, but I'll drive for you, and me—and the whole state of Texas." Race let out a long breath and Eleanor gripped his arm tightly. Goodnight noticed this and asked with his customary bluntness, "You two gonna get married?"

"Why, I—" Race began, suddenly unsure of himself.

"Yes," Eleanor laughed. "He hasn't asked me yet but he'll get around to it."

Goodnight dismissed the subject as quickly as he had introduced it, going to the next like a man shooting tin cans off a backyard fence. "Eastman may put up a fight, and then if he don't, you'll have your hands full with a lot of sour people who want quick returns. Lookin' at both sides of it, I'd say I got the easy job."

"I'll take care of it here," Race said solidly. "You drive cattle. Once the rest of Texas sees and hears what we done—well, it'll turn out all right."

Goodnight grunted and picked up his hat, signifying that the interview was concluded. He said his brief good-byes and went after his horse.

Race said, "I'll need you in town with me, Wes." The young man nodded and went into the bedroom after his revolver. Fred's eyes clouded and his mouth pulled into a tight line, but he made no protest.

He said, "'Sfunny thing. I place my future prosperity in Goodnight's hands. I place my son's life in yours. I sure must have a lot of faith in you two."

They streamed out of the house into the growing darkness, and Race lifted the girl to the saddle, mounting a moment later. Wes Cardigan came up on a fine calico stud and they rode from the yard as night dropped over the land.

Hondo's main street was wild with sound and light as they bracketed the foot, paus-

ing to take in the people milling and calling to each other. At the south edge of town, near the loading pens, gunfire etched bright flashes in the night as the Texans broke through and turned two thousand lowing cattle onto the desert edge.

Pack Wingert dodged from between two vacant buildings, paused to fling a shot back through the passageway, and wheeled toward the street. He saw Race and Cardigan and altered his course. "Godamighty," he said, then saw the girl. "'Scuse me, ma'am. I plumb forgot m'self."

Race and young Cardigan dismounted. "What's goin' on?"

"Fight!" Pack proclaimed inanely. "That Yankee moneybag—beggin' your pardon, ma'am—pawned off some of them printed bills and all hell popped loose. A bunch from the breaks busted into the corral and took the stock. White got killed right off durin' the street fightin'."

Eleanor asked, "Is my father all right?"

"Reckon he is," Pack said. "The folks is a little excited now and they ain't thought to fetch up a rope yet, but I guess they'll get around to it before the night's over." He turned to Race and plucked at his sleeve. "Guess you better do somethin' quick if'n you're gonna do it. There's a bunch of fellas boarded up in the vacant saloon and it won't be long before someone gets the idea to set fire to that new-fangled buildin'."

Race said, "Wes, get over to that saloon and see if you can talk some sense into 'em. Tell 'em about Goodnight. Calm 'em down and tell 'em that Eastman is through."

Wes Cardigan's young face was awed and he glanced at the girl. "Is he, Floyd?"

Race nodded and young Cardigan sprinted across the street. Race turned toward the Cattle Corporation building and Eleanor dismounted. "I'm going with you," she said, without fear in her voice.

Lights burned from every window, sending long fingers of brightness into the street. Race set up a long-legged pace and she half-ran to keep up with them. Someone opened up with a rifle and a bullet plowed through the thin siding of a near building. He cursed and tried to hug the shadows; flitting rapidly across the patches of lamplight until he came to the wide veranda of the Cattle Company building. Only a few isolated shots pecked at them as they scurried across the porch.

Eleanor was pale, but she bit her lower lip and followed him up the stairs. Race

Goodnight started the desperate drive. . . .

still cradled his saddle gun and when he met the slight Ott coming down, lifted it instinctively.

Ott stared at him for a long moment and said, "This is your doing, Rebel. You stirred 'em up." The man reached for his gun. Race nestled the stock against his hip, his elbow holding it firm and wiped his palm across the hammer.

Ott caught the bullet and he folded, taking the stairs in a lifeless roll. He struck Eleanor, driving her against the railing, then thumped his way to the bottom.

HER eyes were round and frightened and showed a great deal of the white. She murmured, "Father was right. You can kill."

Race gave her no answer, but plunged up the few remaining steps and hit Eastman's door with a ramming shoulder. The panel gave, then splintered and he was in the room.

Thaddeus Eastman stood away from the window, yet close enough so that he could observe the street. He was pale, but there was no fright in his eyes.

"Not very pretty is it?" Race asked. Eleanor crowded around him and stared at her father. She saw the look on his face and it held her by Floyd Race's side.

"What happened out there " Eastman asked in an unbelieving voice.

"You know," Race said. "I told you once about Texans, the first day in town, but you didn't believe me."

Eastman wiped a shaking hand across his face and the palm came away moist. "It's incredible!" he said. "So much careful planning flying to pieces like this. Maldeern down at my store gave a man some script for change. The man flared up and struck Maldeern. Then the fight grew until the whole street was fighting. They wrecked the store and carried off what they wanted. Some men from the breaks broke into the corral. White shot one man and some of the others killed him. Allbeck lost his head completely and fired into a crowd, hitting a woman. Then there was no stopping them."

Below in the street, the firing went on; the yelling mounted. Glass shattered in the offices below. Horses milled and the flash of hidden guns blossomed wickedly in the darkness.

Race said, "I tried to tell you. They're Texans. They'll take your money and when it's gone, drive you out because they got no use for Yankee profiteers. You thought money bought everything, but you are learning different."

Eastman's voice was full of appeal. "You can stop this, Race. You're a Texan. You know how to handle them."

"What makes you think I want to?" Race gave it to him quick. He watched Eastman and saw that he still clung to his dream. Race added, "I killed Ott on the stairs. I can go out and do the same to Allbeck, but it'll cost you. Nothing is for nothing—that's been your sermon."

"What do I have left to bargain with?" Eastman saw that Race would give him no encouragement. "You strike a hard bargain, Race. You always did. I knew that you might whip me when you put your foot on that dollar. It's always been in the back of my mind. You're the first man that ever made me doubt myself. You guessed that I was broke when I had that script printed. There wasn't a dollar behind it. I spent it all. I'm licked and you know I have nothing to bargain with."

He crossed to the window and gazed into the street. He gave a short laugh and said, "You know—it's funny at that. Look at them. Dirty and ragged. Without a cent —just like me, only they're better than me. I would have picked that dollar up, Race. I don't have much pride. But those people have a dream, a faith—and I can't beat that. I figured everything but pride. I didn't know that it was unconquerable." He thought of it for a moment, then

slapped his leg. "I should have known that, Race, because I once had it myself—when I first started out. It's hell how ambition and greed will make a man forget. We used to live in a little brown house on Utica street with an iron deer on the lawn and a gate that squeaked in spite of the oiling. Somehow, I miss that squeeky gate. It's like the Texans—stubborn. It just wouldn't quit squeaking."

Eleanor's eyes filled and she moved to him in a rush, clutching him and crying and thanking him in a fervent voice. Eastman was affected and his voice was husky. "I guess I ought to thank you, Race. You gave me my daughter back." He ran his hand through his hair, then added, "Give them back their land, I couldn't hold it. Tell them it's a loan, the money I spent for it. Tell them anything you want. Maybe someday I'll be able to repay you."

Race took two long steps and shook Eastman's hand. "I feel a little uncomfortable, shakin' hands with a Yankee this way, but seein's how you're gonna be my father-in-law, I might as well get used to it." Thaddeus Eastman's eyes widened for a moment, then they grew warm and Race knew there were no complaints.

Floyd Race understood that no war was over. There would always be ambitious men as there would always be Texas and skinny cattle and dust. But there was life and it was a strong call within him. He gathered the girl in his arms and kissed her His voice was soft and his lips long with his thoughts. "Nothin' is easy in Texas," he told her. "It uses men hard and women harder. You sure you want that?" It was a foolish question, he knew that, but there was some foolishness in every man He cradled his gun efficiently in the crook of his arm; there was no fear or uncertainty in his eyes. He would always win because he was the spawn of a people who knew no defeat. ## ## ##

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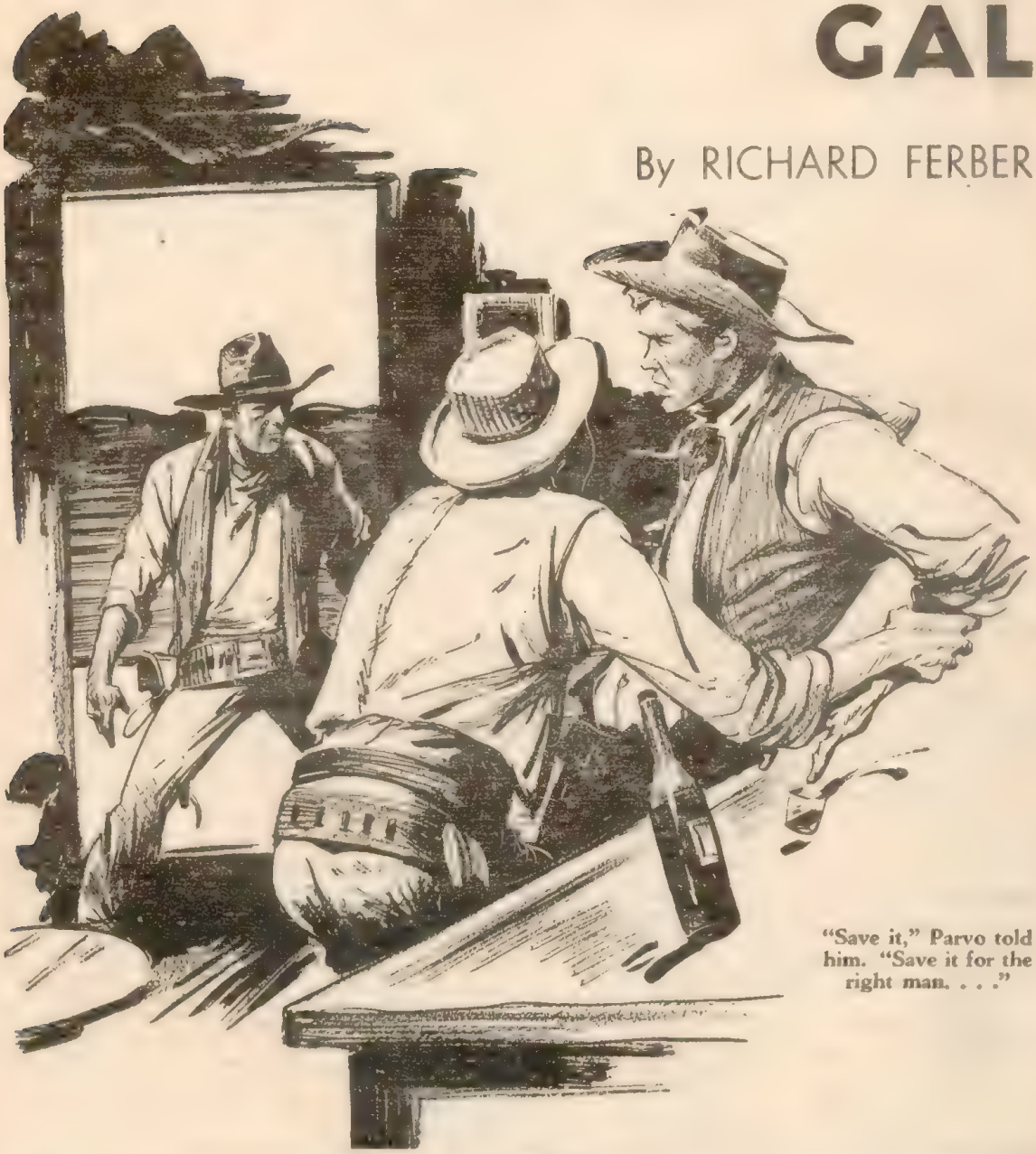
GUNMAN'S GAL

By RICHARD FERBER



"Save it," Parvo told him. "Save it for the right man. . . ."

The Horsehead punchers laughed their fool heads off, when they saw the kid all dolled up for courtin'. But they stopped laughing when they found the kid's top rival—bushwhacked!

THE cook had put up the long table and benches outside the kitchen door as he did each spring when the weather turned warm enough. It was not because it was more pleasant there—in the high valley the sun had little warmth yet—it was because the cook was lazy and the men knew better than to complain. They sat along the benches now, taking their

second coffee and waiting for the sun to move above the cottonwoods with its thin heat.

Frank Coleman came out of the bunkhouse, moving rapidly, but half-way across the yard he saw the near emptiness of the table and he slowed to a self-conscious walk. He had just shaved and the cold air bit his face, smarting it. He had left his hat in the bunk house because of his fear of spoiling the neat comb of his hair, but seeing the men he regretted it. He waited until they had shoved sufficiently down the bench, then he sat down and poured the coffee silently. Across from him Sam Parvo, the foreman, was smiling wryly.

Somebody down the table said: "The kid looks fine. I'll be damned if he doesn't. He must have a pound of wagon grease in his hair."

Another Horsehead man stood up and bent over the table, peering, then sat down and said quietly, "I think he shaved."

Over the top of the tin cup Coleman watched the humor light the men's faces, but he said nothing. He was the kid of the outfit, he knew that, and he accepted it with all the grace he could. And today he didn't particularly care. There was more than one shaved face at the Horsehead table this morning. Only the men of the skeleton crew were slow to the laughter.

He was the kid only because he was the youngest. He sat stiffly at the table, a tall man with thick, hard shoulders and a leanness about the rest of him that bespoke the long hours in the saddle. His sandy hair was slicked down too much; there was a scrubbed look about his face that, nonetheless, changed little the weathered quality of his features. He finished the coffee, put the empty cup down in front of him and rolled himself a cigarette.

The cook came out of the kitchen, slamming the screen door noisily, and stood beside him. He saw Coleman's empty cup and he poured more coffee into it. He said, "Maybe I should bring a chair out. Maybe this kid ought to sit at the head of the table."

The cook was an unpleasant man; he used his tongue with a harsh, unhumorous abandon. He had no friends among the riding crew and now they gave him no answer. But he persisted: "I reckon it happens every spring, every year when the snow leaves the pass. I been here three years and it's the same every time. Only since when did the kid get in on the chase? He acts like that Hopkins gal has been pining her heart out all winter, just waitin' for him." He wiped his hands on the already dirty apron and waited a moment for the response.

"Shut up," Sam Parvo said, then let it go. He was an old hand, a strong wind-bitten man who spoke little except with the narrowed blackness of his eyes. And he knew the cook, and he knew enough to let the man have his way. He looked at the kid understandingly, then covered his face with the uptilted cup.

"Maybe old cookie's jealous," a man said from the other end of the table. "Maybe old cookie's got an eye on that little filly himself."

The cook laughed scornfully. "That one. She's no good."

"She's the only woman in town," the man replied lightly. "Unless you count Judge Kenningson's wife. And Ma Pearly . . . and I don't know of anyone who does unless it's Pearly himself."

"She's still no good," the cook said. "Just a tease, that's all."

"Then you're lookin' at someone who likes to be teased, Cookie," the man answered, chuckling.

Sam Parvo stood up, the cup in his hand. He threw it and the puncher ducked back, took the cup on his chest and fell backward off the bench. A man started to laugh, then stopped himself at the silence of the rest of the crew.

Sam Parvo said harshly, "Lay off the kid, Whitey. Lay off him or you'll go to

town with your damned nose split open."

The cook took the hint too and went quickly into the kitchen. The man called Whitey stood up. He brushed the fine dust from his jeans, and said, "It was only a joke, Sam. It was only a joke." He walked slowly toward the bunkhouse, his back arched in humiliation. Parvo sat down again and fixed his eyes on the rough boards of the table. The kid watched him and hid his embarrassment behind the quick, nervous puffs of his cigarette.

THE sun was well above the cottonwoods, warming the valley, when Coleman and Parvo took the trail that led through the long meadow and later dipped down the slope of the mountains to the larger valley below. The kid always rode with Parvo, had at least for the two years since he'd hired on with the Horsehead spread. It was like that with the Horsehead outfit; there were the long winters in the mountains and two men just naturally came together. But it was not a close relationship; Parvo was a tight-mouthed man who set little store by his own talking. Even now, with Meeker's Springs and the first day-off in months ahead of him, he seemed sullen and without anticipation.

When they came into Meeker's Valley, they saw the Springs in the distance, the sun glinting on the east windows of the few buildings. Coleman reined in hard on the sorrel gelding. It had already had its morning bucks, but it threw its head and side-stepped violently. Parvo made a cigarette and sat staring across the distance. The valley was green, and wet underfoot where the water had left the shallow, graded stream and wandered aimlessly. Behind them there was snow yet on the mountains and they looked that way, still feeling the remembered chilliness.

Parvo saw the kid's bright, eager expression and he said, "Remember, kid, it's been a long winter," then paused, waiting for Coleman to turn to him. "Winter will do a lot of things to a man. Do some things to a woman, too. And you ain't the only man expectin' to see Beth Hopkins."

"She told me different," Frank said, paying little heed to Parvo's words. "She gave me the promise. Come spring."

Parvo pulled on the cigarette; he took it from his mouth and studied it carefully. "Women are hard to figure," he said thoughtfully. "But it seems like a woman would go mighty slow about hitchin' on to one man when she's got a whole town to choose from. Especially a girl like Beth Hopkins."

Coleman laid his glance on the older man, searching his down-turned face. He had seldom heard Parvo talk about women; he wondered about it now. Parvo was cynical, Frank knew, and saw little good in most men or women—too little to talk about. Now there was a tightness about his thin lips and he spoke as though talking to no one. "And there's still Laird Kenningson, Frank. You and Laird might be running neck and neck now, but it might be different at the finish. Seems like a girl could take easy to a judge's son. Kenningson's a rich man, and a big power in the valley."

"She told me different," said Coleman, the irritation setting in him. He kicked the sorrel into a short lope through the slough grass, not waiting for Parvo to fall in beside him. But as he rode he thought about Parvo's words. He had met Beth Hopkins the summer before and he had known then the kind of a girl she was, different from what the rest of the valley considered her. It was only that she was young and the one pretty woman in town. It was small wonder that she had many friends.

That wouldn't matter now. She had told him plain enough, told him that last night before he had ridden back to the ranch, the snow fast-closing the pass behind him. It had made a long winter; the waiting and the talk of the Horsehead crews, but he had taken it without protest. Now Sam's words rankled him and he pushed them far

back into his mind and kicked the sorrel hard, sending it into a fast run toward the town that loomed up close in the distance.

They rode into Meeker's Springs slowly, taking in the sights of it as though they were two men who had never seen a town before. The street ran downhill a little from the edge of the houses before it leveled out in front of the bank. It was the only street, bordered by half a dozen once-painted, high-front buildings, but in the back of town a few alleys ran their curved courses and disappeared into the flat of the grasslands. They passed the bank, and Meeker's old hotel, and the narrow, small-windowed sheriff's office with the saddlery next door. It was noon, Saturday-noon, and the rigs stood crowded along the racks, their teams' restlessness sending up the fine dust from the street. Further down, on the corner of the alley, stood Pearly's saloon, a tall building with a long sagging porch. Parvo reined in opposite it, waiting for Coleman to stop.

"Have a drink first," he said.

Coleman turned the pony and shook his head smiling. Parvo moved up closer to him, insisting, "Have a drink first, kid. It's early yet. You can't go courtin' in the middle of the day."

Coleman hesitated. He looked down the street to where the plaza made its turn around the hill and shrank, further on, into a path along the stream. Past the row of houses, out of sight now, was the Hopkins' place. But Parvo was right, there was plenty of time. Finally he moved to the rack, crowding between the horses and dismounted.

Along the porch a few men sprawled, made sleepy by the sunlight and the warmth of Pearly's booze. Parvo spoke to one of them and the man looked up, said nothing understandable, then dropped his head on his chest again. There were no swinging doors on Pearly's saloon, only two glass doors that stuck and then rattled when you opened them. The place had been a boarding house once, before Pearly discovered that the town had little use for it. There were still rooms upstairs, used only by Pearly and his wife and the occasional puncher who sometimes thought better of the long ride back to his own bunkhouse. But the doors were wide-open now and when the two men stepped inside they felt immediately the stifling, smoke-filled air of the place.

THERE was a small crowd at the bar and Parvo went up to it quickly, shouldering his way heedlessly between the men. Tip Pearly was at the other end of the plank and behind him on the stool his wife sat, her fat body heaving gently in the hot, breathless atmosphere.

Pearly saw them at once; his small blinking eyes missed nothing. He took a bottle and came toward them, his tight, fleshless body jerking a little as he walked. He put two glasses and the bottle in front of them, pouring the whisky himself, and said, "Horsehead. Welcome back to town, boys. The first one's on Pearly."

Parvo drank up. Frank watched him, then took his own down, choking at the raw feeling in his throat. Parvo put a dollar on the bar, poured two more drinks and settled elbows down, his gaze fixed blankly on the mirror. Frank turned, his eyes searching the room idly, noting the familiar faces there.

Along the front of the building were tall, dust-laden windows and in the broad shaft of sunlight that sifted through them a few men were playing cards at an ancient, oilcloth covered table. Frank saw Whitey there, and two other Horsehead men. Next to him he heard Parvo speak and he turned back. "Drink up, kid," Parvo was saying. "It's been a long winter."

Tip Pearly didn't take the money until they had finished the second drink and started on the third. After awhile Ma came down, her very walking an effort, and stopped in front of them, two massive elbows planted on the bar. She was incred-

ibly fat. Her body blocked Frank's view of the mirror. She paid no attention to the sweat that covered her face and ran down along the bridge of her nose. Her hands worked indifferently with a fan . . . a torn dainty relic of her younger, slimmer years. She looked at Frank closely, making a clucking sound in her throat and said, "You been down to Beth Hopkins, son?"

"I was on my way down there now, Ma'am," Frank answered her politely.

Ma laughed without explanation. She turned to Parvo, ignoring Frank, and said, "Next thing I know, you'll be down there too, Sam, knockin' on her door with a bunch of posies in your hand."

Frank ignored the remark. He lifted the glass and poured the drink down boldly, the liquor slopping over his chin and onto the front of his shirt. Parvo grinned thinly, took the bottle and filled Coleman's glass again. The kid glanced at him quizzically, but said nothing.

Ma Pearly's voice was droning on, her fat features in an indulgent smile. "It's like when I was a young girl." Her eyes rolled with the recollection. "I had the suitors. That Beth Hopkins, she ain't got nothing to what I had. And there weren't ever too many for me, dearie—I gave 'em all a fling. A gal's got a right to do that. Of course, when Pearly came along it was different."

"Take it easy on the kid, Ma," Parvo interrupted her, but his tone was mild and without command.

Ma looked at Coleman as though seeing him for the first time. She grinned brightly, then went back to Parvo again. Parvo said confidentially, "She must have kissed him before the snows closed in. He's been in a line shack all winter, thinkin' about it."

Ma Pearly laughed. Out of the corner of his eye Frank could see her glance and he drank again, the raw bitterness of the whisky untasted now. A fly buzzed persistently about the dark grease of Ma Pearly's hair and he watched it for awhile, unconscious of the nearby talking. There was a warm heaviness in his stomach and the rumble in the saloon seemed louder, pressing against his brain. He looked down dumbly to see Sam Parvo filling the glass again and his hand went senselessly to it. He felt the stickiness of the liquor on his chin, but it was a few seconds before he reached up to wipe it off.

Ma Pearly was saying, "I hear she's taken up with Judge Kenningson's boy. Can't say as I blame her. It's one way to keep from gettin' run out of the county."

Frank turned and tried to say something to her, but she went on without hearing him. He started to say it louder, then a hand touched his shoulder, stopping him. He wheeled about clumsily and saw the man Whitey standing with his thumbs hooked in his belt, his hat pushed far back on his head. "I figured to see you walkin' under a parasol with your one love, kid," Whitey said loudly. "The one true flower of Meeker's Springs." He tilted back, guffawing, and behind him, at the card table, the two Horsehead men took up the laugh. Coleman drove straight ahead, knocking Whitey back on his heels. His right arm swung in a long, sweeping arc and Sam Parvo caught that arm and stepped in close, pinning Coleman to the bar. "Save it," Parvo told him sternly. "He's not cuttin' your time. Save it for the right man."

Coleman's body relaxed. He looked down at the older man, his eyes wide and staring. "What?" he said vaguely. Parvo let him go and turned back to the bar. Frank followed him with his glance, wanting to meet the man's eyes once more but Parvo didn't look up. When he turned back to his glass again he saw it was full and he picked it up with uncertain fingers.

THE saloon was crowded now. The men came inside in small bunches, pushing their way good-naturedly to the bar and calling to Tim Pearly in rough dry voices. Behind the plank Pearly sweated and cursed

each time he had to force his way past the jelly-like but unyielding figure of his wife. Somebody started banging the piano, but a man shouted him down and the noise ceased. Parvo bought a tinder-dry cigar, lighted it and listened with seeming carelessness to Ma Pearly's self-indulgent conversation. He stood loose-bodied, his shoulders hunched and without concern, but there was a deep, hard set to his eyes, even when they narrowed against the smoke. Coleman stood beside him, watching the little pool of liquor on the bar where he had spilled it. The last drink had crept back into his throat and he swallowed rapidly trying to force it down again. He had begun to feel sick without quite knowing it.

He meant to tell Sam Parvo that he was leaving, that he had waited too long. He turned to the man but Sam was looking past his shoulders toward the open doors. Parvo nudged him suddenly. He wheeled about, following Parvo's gaze, and saw Laird Kenningson standing in the doorway.

Kenningson hesitated, conscious of his entrance, then started past them toward the far end of the bar. Parvo put out a hand, stopping him, and said in a friendly voice, "Have a drink with us, Kenningson."

Kenningson straightened up and for a long minute studied the two men interestedly. He was a few years older than Coleman, a stiff, straight-backed kid whose little flesh clung loosely to his long frame. He had pitch dark hair and gray eyes that were set in a pale, almost paste-like face. He had been to college somewhere in Iowa, it was said, and when he spoke his tone was affected.

"I'll be glad to, gentlemen," he told them. He stepped closer to the bar, waiting for Pearly to bring the glass. He wore neatly-creased trousers and a small, well-blocked stockman's hat and he seemed out of place in the unclean atmosphere of the saloon. When Pearly put the glass down in front of him he said, "Scotch," and glanced away disinterestedly.

"I've got no Scotch," Pearly said hurriedly. "I've told you that, Mr. Kenningson. There ain't no Scotch this side of Denver."

"All right, Pearly," Kenningson said, dismissing the subject with a wave of his hand. He watched Pearly pour the drink; he picked it up and tilted it down without acknowledging Parvo or the kid. He took a wide silk handkerchief from his pocket and patted gently at his mouth.

Parvo said, "You know Frank Coleman, here. You and he have got something in common."

"What's that?" Kenningson asked, shifting so that he faced the kid. He seemed unaware of the introduction.

"Beth Hopkins," Parvo said, the surprise edging his voice. "Haven't you heard? Beth and the kid are gonna get married."

Kenningson's mouth fell open; he stared at Coleman, his eyes round and straining. Then he laughed, a high thin laugh that raised itself above the rumble of the voices. "You're joking," he said at last, but his gaze remained on Coleman, moving up and down him in open wonderment.

"There's no joke," Parvo said innocently. "Where do you see the joke?"

Kenningson smiled silently. The kid pushed himself away from the bar, keeping one hand on it to steady himself against the uneasiness in his legs. He looked at Kenningson seeing him only in a half-gaze. He said thickly, "Where's the joke, Kenningson?"

Kenningson saw the kid's drunkenness and he laughed again. "Don't ask me, kid. Ask Beth Hopkins. Ride down there now and have her laugh in your face."

Parvo backed clear, pushing at the men behind him. Coleman didn't see the tight line of his smile. The anger drove some of the weakness from him. He brought his right hand up and swung awkwardly. Kenningson ducked back and the kid lunged past him, tried to twist around again, and sat heavily on the floor. Pearly yelled,

"Listen, here," then stopped at his wife's menacing, "Tim."

The men gave way, packing into a tight crowd at the corner of the saloon. Coleman got up, watching Kenningson's smile, and swung again.

Kenningson blocked the punch and sent two light taps to Coleman's face. He moved easily, sure of himself . . . more sure because of the kid's drunkenness. He waited for the kid to move in, bull-like and awkward, and drove his right hand to the kid's cheek without effect. He danced away and Coleman followed him his brain hampered by the whisky and the tapping of Kenningson's fist. He winced when Kenningson's hand crashed into his stomach and he felt the bile leap suddenly into his mouth. He spat it out and sent a right hand at Kenningson's body. He missed and ducked down, helpless for a moment, taking the man's hammering blows on the back of his head.

In front of him, Kenningson's body seemed to move crazily. He swung at it and hit nothing; he swung again and then felt his hand slam into the man's ribs. He heard Kenningson's grunt and he saw him try to slip out from the wall and he drove at him with the remaining power in his legs. He caught the man with his shoulder, knocking him back against the wall. The thin boards rattled and down near the windows a lamp tottered and crashed to the floor.

Kenningson's fists were beating on him now, beating harmlessly at his shoulders and sides. He grasped the man and flung him savagely, and watched him as he slid across the floor and came up short against the leg of the card table. He was on top of him when he got to his feet; and he sent his fist crashing into Kenningson's face. Kenningson spun and pitched forward across the table, then pitched down taking the table with him. He stood up and tried to move away, the fright showing clearly on his battered features. Coleman stepped in close to him, sinking his fist in Kenningson's belly. He felt the man's body shudder and double up, and he let him go, watching him sink limply to the floor.

There was some blood around Coleman's nose and he put his hand up to it and touched it without feeling. The anger and the whisky had left him without sense and he said, "Next time I'll kill yuh, Kenningson. Next time I'll kill yuh." Then he turned and walked uncertainly to the bar.

The crowd was silent for awhile. Later, when they had helped Kenningson outside to his horse, the talk started again, filling the low confinement of the saloon. Parvo stood next to Coleman, one hand on the kid's shoulder as he poured the whisky. The kid felt sick, a deep-pitted sickness that began in his stomach and moved up so that he could taste it in his throat. But he took the whisky down, his mind riled into a desire for it.

Parvo was talking to him, his voice a low rumble that Coleman heard only vaguely. He tried to think, and minutes later wondered what there was to think about. He drank again and made a feeble attempt to build himself a cigarette, and he had no awareness of Parvo's close-eyed watching. The lamps had gone on in the saloon and, seeing that, he stared into the mirror, checking for the outside darkness in its reflection.

He saw a face and it meant nothing to him; then the full wave of the nausea struck at him and he said hoarsely, "I'm gonna be sick." He remembered Parvo helping him through the door and moving him toward the darkness at the back of the saloon. There was a watering trough there and after he was sick the man guided him to it and held him while he drank, the water flooding his nostrils. He sat down by the trough, his body sagging against it, and heard Parvo say, "You'll be all right, Kid." He thought he saw Parvo disappear into the shadows then, but he couldn't be sure of that.

HE AWOKE with the sunlight streaming through the tall, dust-curtained window. He shifted his weight, feeling the hard steel springs under him, and tried to steady his reeling brain.

He sat up quickly and violently, but his head ached and he lay back on the bed once more, his eyes closed, trying to remember. Out on the stairs he heard footsteps and, a second later, Sam Parvo opened the door. He was breathing rapidly and he wore a twisted anxiety on his face.

"Listen, Frank," he said. "Laird Kenningson's dead."

Coleman sat up again, not understanding. He put one hand up to his head, groaned, and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Kid," Parvo said. "Listen to me. Where were you last night?"

"I don't know." Coleman shook his head and stared dully at the floor. Then he looked up. "What do you mean, Sam? I was with you last night."

"After I left you, after I left you," Parvo said impatiently. "I left you at the trough, kid, in back of Pearly's. It was early then. Don't you remember?"

The kid didn't. He stood up, saying nothing. Parvo came in closer to him, taking him by the shoulders and said, "Kenningson's dead, Frank. They found him out in the grass. They think you did it."

The words began to register on the kid's brain then. He moved away from Parvo, his eyes going about the room and then returning to the man. He said: "No, Sam. They're wrong. I'll tell them they're wrong."

Parvo stood quiet and watched him. Coleman went to the foot of the iron bed, put on his hat and began fastening the gunbelt. He looked up suddenly and said: "Who told them that, Sam? Who told them I killed Kenningson?" Suspicion filled his eyes for a moment, then passed swiftly.

Parvo glanced away, hesitating. Finally he said, "Nobody told them, Kid. Nobody had to. They know how you felt about Beth Hopkins. They saw the fight, and they heard you tell Kenningson you were going to kill him."

"That's crazy," Coleman said, but the conviction had left his voice. "I was drunk, Sam. You know that. But I wouldn't have killed him."

"I know," Parvo told him.

Coleman walked to the door and stopped, his hand twisting the knob. Parvo leaned easily against the wall, causing the boards to squeak a little. His eyes were narrowed to thin, obdurate slits and there was a strange tautness about his mouth. He said gently, "Listen to me, kid. I've seen this kind of thing. They won't ask any questions. And they won't believe you. Judge Kenningson won't believe you, not with his son lying out on the prairie with a bullet in his back."

"Sure," Coleman said, but his hand remained on the door knob, uncertain.

"Ride out of here," Parvo went on. "I've got your horse down stairs, saddled and ready. Ride out of here. There's nothing in Meeker's Valley for you."

"No, I guess not," the kid said. He forgot the girl then, forgot the long winter that he had waited to come back to this place. He said, "All right, Parvo," opened the door and followed the man out.

There was only one stairs down from Pearly's rooms. It came out into the back corner of the saloon and the kid waited while Coleman went into the street. Pearly was at the bar; Ma Pearly would be upstairs somewhere, still sleeping. Pearly eyed him for awhile, not speaking, then said, "Drink, kid?"

Coleman shook his head silently. He saw Parvo come up on the sidewalk and he went outside and stepped into the saddle. They turned the corner of the saloon and went past the trough; there was a man watering his horse there, but he paid no

attention to them. A cliff rose steep in front of them and they circled that, found a dim trail up the grassy slope and followed it. The horses labored under them, grunting at each step. When they came to the first stand of timber Parvo reined up his mount. Down below them, still close, they could see the town of Meeker's Springs through a fine haze of dust.

"This is it, kid," Parvo said quietly. He took a fold of money from his pocket, and a bag of tobacco and papers, and handed it to the kid. "Just keep riding, Frank. They'll come after you. But they won't catch you if you keep ridin'."

Coleman took the things, said, "Thanks," and watched Parvo turn his horse back down the hill. After the man had passed from sight around the rim of the cliff he led the sorrel into the shade of the pines and sat resting. He rolled himself a cigarette, troubled some by the shaking of his hands. He could see that Parvo was right; he was in a bad spot and it was better to leave Meeker's Valley. There were other places, other jobs and other towns and the same people.

But there was still the girl. He wondered about her now. Parvo and Ma Pearly and the rest of them . . . they had all said the same thing. He hadn't believed them then and there was still the doubt in his mind. He wished he could recall the details from the night before, but it was too late for that. He pulled on the cigarette and stared absently across the valley. He made no move to get up. It was better to wait, he thought, better to wait till sundown before he made his move.

THERE was a thin moon in the sky when he tightened the cinches, swung into the saddle and moved south along the slope of the hill. He rode until the lights of the town had disappeared behind the out-juttings of the hills, then dropped down into the valley and waited while the sorrel drank at the stream. A half-mile up river was the town and he went that way, following the faded wagon path. When he turned the big bend he could still not see the Springs, but to his left, on the far side of the river, the lights from the Hopkins' cabin shone dully.

The road started here and the pony stepped noiselessly in the dust. Coleman moved it to the willow tree, standing isolated on the near bank, and stopped. A short bridge spanned the stream, running from the bank to the front door of the house; a horse stood tied to it now, a common chestnut without markings. In the dim moonlight he couldn't read the brand. He made a cigarette, then was afraid of the sharp flare of the match and didn't light it. He tried to settle himself comfortably in the saddle, his gaze fixed on the shaded windows of the cabin.

It was a half-hour later when the door opened and he saw the two figures silhouetted against the lantern light of the room. He couldn't make the man out from the distance; he waited impatiently now. The two figures came together for a moment and he heard a short, light laugh; then the man left and started across the bridge, the door closing behind him. Coleman recognized the man from his walk. Parvo was across the bridge and to his horse when he called to him.

"I wasn't expecting to see you, Parvo!"

Parvo wheeled about, his hand poised above the butt of his gun. He peered into the darkness of the willow and said: "Who's there?"

"Frank. Frank Coleman," The kid answered him.

Parvo seemed to relax. He half-turned and patted the neck of his chestnut. "Didn't figure you'd come back, kid," he said calmly.

"I never left," Coleman said. "I waited up in those pines. I got to thinkin'. I got curious and I rode down here."

"They'll be after you," Parvo said, his tone searching now.

Coleman saw the man's glance cast through the shadows of the willow. His horse stomped nervously under him. He said: "I guess not, Parvo. I guess it will be you they'll be after."

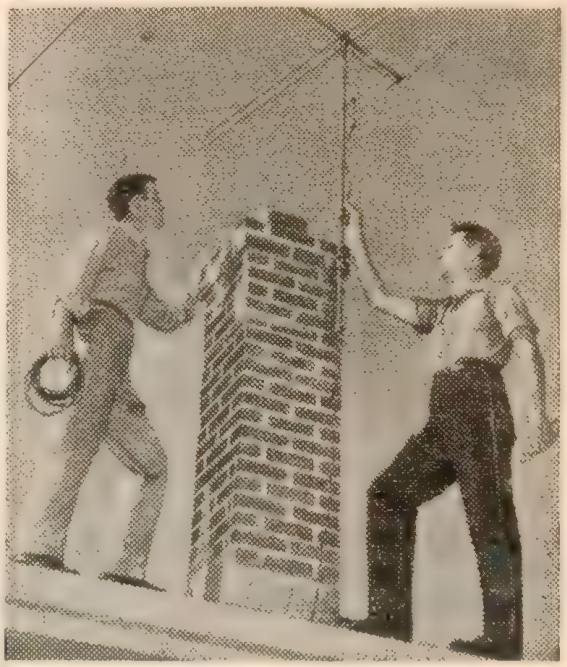
"All right, kid," Parvo said resignedly. His arms dangled limply and he moved out into the clearing a little. "But you understand, don't you, kid? I knew the way she was, but it didn't matter. I couldn't let you stand in my way. You and that Kenningson kid. You know how I felt. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I can understand," Coleman answered him simply.

"Sure," Parvo said. He tensed suddenly and his hand came up, bringing the gun with it. The explosion rocked Coleman back; he felt the slug tear through the willow branches near him. The sorrel bucked under him and he brought his own Colt out. He swung with the movement of the horse and fired. Parvo jerked and threw a hand up under his heart. He tried to bring the gun up level again, but he found no strength there now and the weapon slipped from his grasp. He tried to reach down for it, then pitched headlong into the clearing.

Coleman came out of the shadow of the tree and dismounted. He worked Parvo's dead body to the saddle of the chestnut and tied it securely. He went back to his own mount and for a moment stood quietly. The cold cigarette was still in his mouth and he scratched a match on the holstered gun, lighting it. Across the bridge the girl was standing in the doorway again, saying nothing . . . and he said nothing to her. He stepped into the saddle and turned toward the town, pulling the burdened pony behind him.

In a few minutes he would be in Meeker's Springs and he could tell it to the sheriff then. After that he would ride back to the Horsehead ranch. It was better than spending another night in Pearly's hotel. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂



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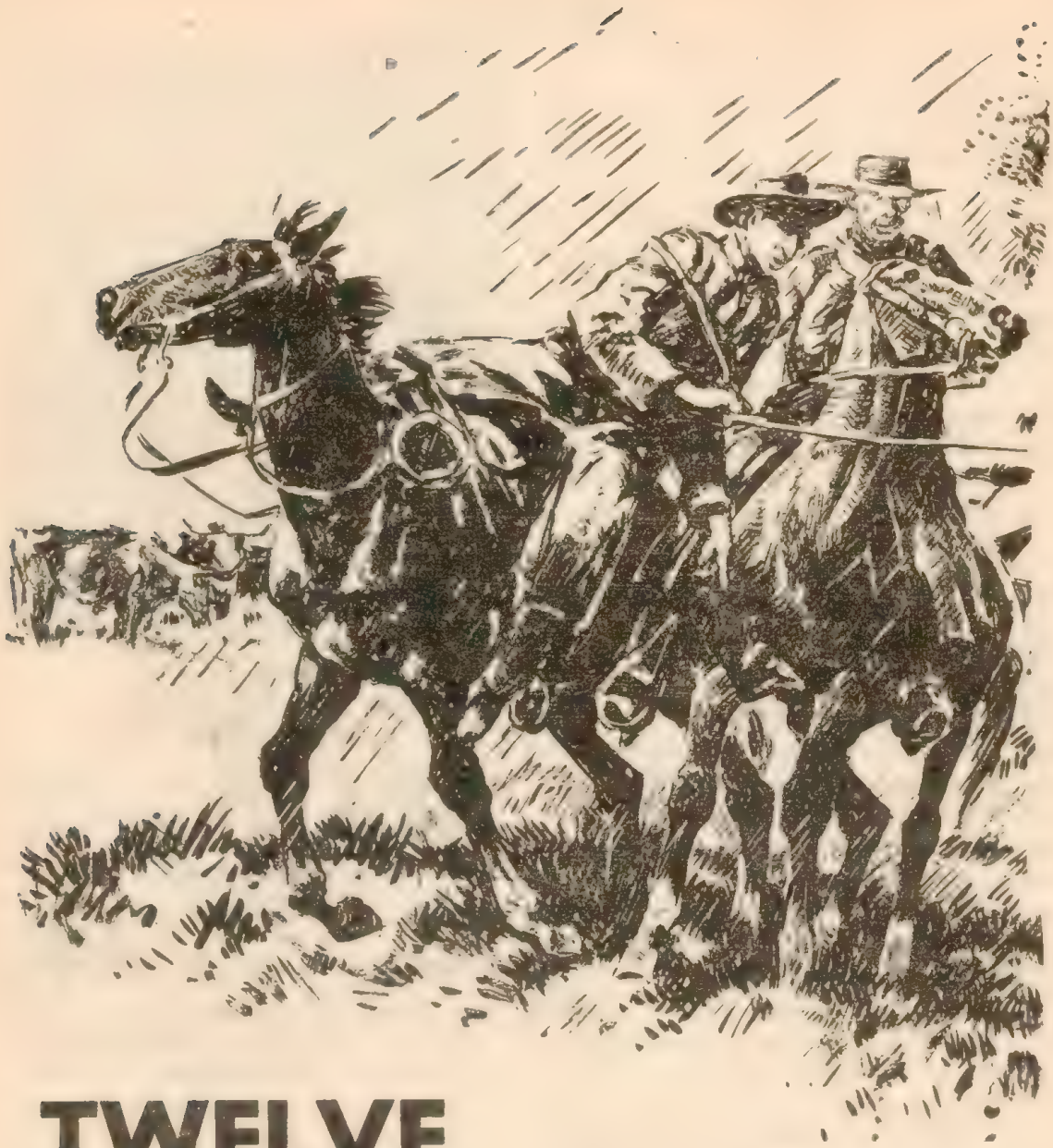

TWELVE DAYS TO DIE!

They'd be waiting for Dandridge when he rode into Abilene: the pard who'd cheated him, two hired killers—and a one-way ticket to boothill!

By BART CASSIDY

The kid backed off, tightening up the lariat. . . .

THE DOUBLE D was still over the gate when Frank Dandridge turned off the road and sent the horse into a short lope toward the ranch house. The wind had blown some time before and spread the dust evenly across the yard and in the corral behind the bunkhouse. There were no horses at the rack or in the corral; an old steer stood off from the house and eyed him inquisitively. Dandridge let out a yell and dismounted. He got no answer and went up on the porch. The door was

open; through it he could see the emptiness of the house and he went down into the yard again. An old man came around the corner of the building and peered at him for a moment without speaking. Then he moved forward, bent over, and said, "That you, Mr. Dandridge?"

"Hello, Bucky," Dandridge answered him. It was Bucky Gipps, an old DD hand, white-haired and twisted by an ageless case of rheumatism. He came closer now and stared at Dandridge, both hands resting on the small of his back.

"It's been a long time," he said, his voice dry and rasping. "We heard you was comin' back."

Dandridge made a long survey of the yard and found nothing that settled the uneasiness in him. Except for the old steer, the ranch stook bleak and empty, and out beyond the buildings the grass stretched its miles to the hills without a sign of anything moving on it. Bucky Gipps noted his concern and said: "Left three weeks ago, Mr. Dandridge. Five thousand head or more. Took the new trail up to Abilene."

"That's funny," Dandridge mused. It had been over a month ago that he'd written his partner, Dreyfuss, telling him that he was coming. He hadn't heard that Dreyfuss had meant to throw the herd on the trail, but another week should have made little difference. It was still early spring and there would be plenty of grass.

"Did he leave any message, Bucky?" he asked.

"Didn't say a thing, Mr. Dandridge," Gipps told him. "Burned a road brand on 'em and started moving. Didn't act like he was comin' back, though. He left me here, but that's cause he figured I was too old to make the ride."

"This trail," Dandridge said. "You say it goes to Abilene?"

The old man shifted and tried to straighten his back; he shook his head and grimaced a little at the pain. It made his breath come hard, interrupting his flow of talk. "Place up in Kansas called that. There's a railroad there." He stopped and squinted at Dandridge. "You didn't hear about it where you were?"

"I didn't hear much, Bucky," Dandridge said restlessly. He listened absently to the drone of Bucky's voice and his eyes kept searching through the emptiness of the ranch yard. He was tall and lean, but some of the hardness had gone from him and there was a drawn paleness about his skin. Gray showed through his sandy hair and he kept moving his legs to work the stiffness from them. He noted that stiffness and smiled a little because it had once been such an unfamiliar thing.

BUCKY GIPPS was saying: "You turn north along the Brazos River and cross the Red. I don't know after that. I can let you have a couple of horses if you want to follow them."

"I'll take one," Dandridge said. His own pony was near-lame and it had been a poor animal to start with.

Gipps' cavvy was in the corral at the back of the ranch house. Dandridge led his pony there and took down the riata. It was a poor bunch of horses, mostly sore-backs left behind by Dreyfuss and the Double D outfit, but he found a fair sorrel gelding and after a few minutes got his loop on it. He saddled and bridled it and before climbing up paused to roll a cigarette. The old man had turned the extra horse into the corral and was leaning against the gate, watching him.

"It's a funny thing, Mr. Dandridge," he said reflectively. He seemed inclined to let it go at that, but Dandridge looked up from the cigarette questioningly. Gipps came away from the gate, still holding on to it, and glared across the grass. "See that, Mr. Dandridge?" he said. "Not a cow standing on it. Cleaned 'em all out, everything that could walk. All that's left is a few mossy-horns in those brush-hills. Funny he didn't send you word."

"Maybe he wanted to get in ahead of the other outfits," Dandridge said lightly. He stepped into the saddle and waited patiently while the sorrel took its first exercise, bucking a little and sidestepping. Gipps came in closer and had to dodge away to keep from getting knocked down. The pony blew heavily through its nostrils and fought the bit, and Gipps had to speak above the noise.

"Maybe you're right," he shouted. "But if I were you, I wouldn't waste time making tracks. Might be better if you caught up with them before they got to Abilene."

Dandridge tightened the reins and the sorrel took to prancing in a circle and finally stopped. He inspected Gipps' gaunt, weathered features, and said, "What do you mean, Bucky?"

"Don't mean nothing," Gipps replied quickly. "It's none of my business. Just said it was funny, that's all." He went back to the corral, took down a riata and began re-winding it carefully. Dandridge waited for him to go on, but the old man paid no attention to him now. He finished looping the rope, put it back on the gate post, and went toward the lean-to at the back of the ranch house. He stopped, glanced up and said, "Good luck, Mr. Dandridge," and Dandridge turned the sorrel out of the yard.

He followed the wagon path until he met the dusty sweep of the main road. To the east lay Oakville, but he slanted away from it, pointing north across the flat reaches of the prairie. As he rode his eyes took in the once familiar country. Far to his left he could see the remains of Boyd Dobie's tallow factory; behind it a trail ran up through the brush to old Tal Fettle's shack. The rest of this country was empty of life, as it had been since he'd known it. Only it seemed emptier now, with no cattle standing in the tall grass. Even the tracks of the Double D's six thousand had been blown away in the dust, though it was easy to mark the trail by the wide swath of cropped grass where they had slowly grazed along.

It was a strange homecoming, Dandridge thought, a desolate ranch house and only the crippled Gipps to greet him. He had expected something else after the five years in prison. He sent his gaze toward Dobie's barn again and the thin trail into the brush hills beyond. They had found Tal Fettle in front of his shack, dead, with a Henry rifle slug in his back, and a few chunks torn out of his side where the buzzards had worked before they found him. There was talk of a lynching for awhile because Fettle's wife had a house in town and she didn't know what he was doing in the hills. Everybody else did, though. Dandridge had been up that way the same day Fettle was killed. He'd warned him before and it didn't do any good, and there were still plenty of hides outside Dobie's tallow barn with the DD brand on them. He hadn't found Fettle that day; the shack was empty and it was too hot to bother following the crisscross trails through the brush. Nothing much would have come of it except he owned a Henry rifle, Fettle had been shot in the back, and most of the jury were making a living the same way Fettle had. He'd denied the killing, but he couldn't deny he'd been up that way—his horse had a broken shoe and they found the tracks in the dirt—and the judge had given him ten years. He served five of them and made the long ride back to the ranch to find an empty corral and an old sway-backed cow staring at him from the grass.

But those thoughts had little effect on him now. The country began to close in. He came to a wide, endless span of mesquite and the smell of it was good to him. He caught the rhythm of the sorrel under him, the stiffness began to leave his legs, and the leather made a pleasant, remembered creak. He rode a long time, and the darkness pressed down around him when he made his camp at a dry stream-bed where a spring bubbled out of the sand.

It took ten days for Dandridge to make

the Red River station, and he left it behind him and kept riding north. Since the Brazos the trail had widened out so that in some places it stretched across four hundred yards of dust and trampled grass. The dust lingered in the air, choking him, and the wind blew the sand from the banks at the edge of the trail cutting at the flanks of the sorrel. The pony kept the pace and he made forty miles that day before he reined in at a clump of cottonwoods to make camp. It was only after the sun was long down that he saw the lights ahead, saddled up again and rode through the darkness toward them.

THERE was nothing much to the town but a ramshackle store and a shed next to it in which someone had set up a bar. A ranch house stood behind the buildings, tall and once white-painted, and a barn loomed up shapelessly in the shadows across the street. The store was closed up, but a lamp pushed its light through the narrow window of the saloon and there were a few horses tied at the rack in front of it. Dandridge turned in there and dismounted. He was tying the sorrel when the horse next to him slid over and jarred him with its hindquarters. It was a white-stockinged chestnut with a narrow blaze along its nose, and when he shoved it back he saw the DD brand in the slanting light from the saloon. He went around the animal, found the same mark on the left side and stood for a moment, turning the discovery in his mind. The Double D outfit would be days ahead, he knew, and he could think of no explanation for one of its riders hanging behind. The knowledge brought him uneasiness, and without knowing it he loosened the Colt in the holster as he went through the door.

The place was bare except for the plank that ran the length of the room and a three-legged chair that was propped in one corner. Dandridge stopped near the door and made a cigarette while the barkeep came over to him. The man was old and limped when he walked and he put a bottle and glass in front of Dandridge without saying anything. Dandridge poured from the bottle and while he drank made a quick survey of the saloon. At the far end, a man slept with his head on the plank and next to him a lean cowpuncher was talking and trying to spit dust from his mouth. He glanced at Dandridge; and he nudged the man beside him in a futile effort to wake him up. Dandridge dismissed him as some night rider who had sneaked off from the herd and turned his attention to the man nearest him. The man was short, with a thick, heavy body, and he kept his head down, his gaze fixed on his drink. The dust of the trail was on his clothes and had turned grey the dark stubble of his beard. Dandridge studied him for a moment, found nothing familiar, and said to the barkeep: "There's a horse outside wearing a Double D brand. You know the owner?"

He heard the man next to him shift his weight and felt his glance come up to him. The barkeep was sitting on a box now, half-drowsing, and he opened his eyes and shook his head slowly. Dandridge made a quick turn to the man at the bar, but that man had already lowered his gaze and was twirling the whiskey glass in his fingers. He waited for him to look up again, but the man stood motionless, and finally Dandridge finished his drink and went out the door.

He mounted the sorrel and rode it to the shadowed willows at the corner of the barn, and sat waiting. In a moment the thick-set man came out and climbed to the leather of the white-stockinged chestnut. He rode back along the street till he came to the store, then turned in and disappeared in the darkness of the trees. Dandridge listened to the sound of the horse until it faded out; and later a dog barked up near the house and he sent the pony in that direction.

The house stood fifty yards back from the street and when he passed along the

edge of the yard he could smell the dust that the man's horse had kicked up. The yapping of the dog broke the stillness, but above the sound Dandridge could hear the breaking of brush ahead of him. He left the openness of the yard, eased the sorrel through the trees and came to a creek that ran shallow and listless. Across the creek he saw the lighter ground of a clearing and beyond that a stand of elders. To his left the road showed vaguely in the fading light from the saloon window.

The sorrel slipped crossing the stream bed and Dandridge reined in quickly. He could hear nothing now but the faint trickling of water and his eyes searched futilely along the edges of the clearing. He brought the Colt out and was about to go on when the voice came at him in a whisper: "Who's that? Damn-it, who's that?"

The sound came from across the clearing and he waited for a moment, and finally made out the white stockings of the chestnut. The pony was turned sideways to him, pointing toward the road, and he could see the rider casting through the darkness. He lifted the Colt, leveling it on the man, and said, "I asked about that horse you're riding. I won't ask again."

The man cursed jerking the horse around, and the pony went too far and cut into a full circle. The man fired on the turn and the shot whined harmlessly through the trees. Another sent up dust at the sorrel's feet and the sorrel backed into the stream bed and came up again, floundering. Dandridge waited for the animal to quiet, then took slow aim. The man was trying to send the chestnut onto the road, but the pony balked at the thick brush and kept trying to swing back. It was just coming around when Dandridge's slug crashed into the man's chest. He started to fall backwards, still gripping the reins, and the chestnut went back with him. The pony hit on its side and sprang up again, riderless, and began an aimless trot around the clearing.

Dandridge thumbed the hammer and made a careful approach to the spot where the man had gone down. The man was lying on his back, with one hand held lingeringly above his chest. He was dead. Dandridge could see the dark spot where the bullet had driven home, and for a moment he studied the rider's face. The features held no familiarity and they told him nothing. But there was the Double D branded chestnut with the white stockings. He thought, *A man's a fool to ride a horse like that when he's working at night.*

It was clear that the man had meant to kill him. He had waited back a week or more from the trailing herd to do it. The knowledge of this brought a restlessness to Dandridge, and he tried to push it aside, and instead found the suspicion working more strongly in him. He tried to remember Chet Dreyfuss as he had been five years before, but the memory of his partner told him little. Still, Dreyfuss had been expecting him back, and he'd thrown the herd on the trail without waiting for him. Dreyfuss had known he would follow, and there was this man waiting for him with a gun. For Dandridge it had been an easy ride until now, but when he broke through the brush and pointed the sorrel along the openness of the prairie that easiness had left him.

He ran the sorrel hard now, pressing it through the dry day's marches, and riding far into the night. When he stopped he only half-slept, his mind alert to any sound that might break the silence of the empty grassland—some straggling buck Kiowa intent on the sorrel, or another DD rider hanging back from the herd. He crossed the Indian Territory, went through Caldwell and saw only the lights of the town and the bustling roughness of its streets; and days later Wichita was only the bright flickering of sun on windows when he passed it a mile away.

It began to rain that day; Dandridge huddled in his slicker and the trail turned muddy under the tiring legs of the sorrel.

He passed a herd that plodded in a long wearly line that seemed to have no end, and got only a curt nod from the riders. He watched the sky, saw the approaching storm, and as off to the east lightning made its first flash across the darkening clouds, he waited for the sound of it to come to him.

By nightfall he had left the herd far behind and he stopped to make a last search through the failing light for a sign of shelter. Ahead of him a bunch of cottonwoods showed dimly and he pointed the weakening sorrel toward them. When he drew nearer he lost their shape in the darkness and was about to make a switch-back when some sound caught his attention. He reined in the pony and bent low in the saddle, trying for a silhouette against the graying sky, and saw the steer trotting away from him. Another one moved to his left, the far-off lightning making a brief glint on its horns, and he turned then to see the rider come at him from the blackness.

"Who's that?" the man said in a low whisper.

"Dandridge," he answered him. "What herd is this?"

THE rider ignored his question and moved in closer. Dandridge heard him rustling in his slicker and the man finally brought out a match and then thought better of it. He said, "I don't know anyone named Dandridge, Mister. What are you doin' in the herd?"

"Just riding through," Dandridge told him quietly. "I'm looking for the Double D outfit."

The man was silent for a moment and Dandridge could make out the sound of the cattle now. They had been bedded down early, for the ground had gone muddy under their hoofs and they made slushing sounds as they moved. Here and there, fox-fire made its brightness on their horns and for an instant lightened the prairie. The rider started to him and gave it up against the heavy rolls of thunder, and finally said, "A hell of a night for ridin'. You'll find the DD wagon under that clump of cottonwood by the river. Go easy, though, cause these cattle are on the prod. You'll be one sorry man if you start them runnin'."

Dandridge had to kick the sorrel to get it started again. He had gone fifty feet through the darkness when he heard the man call, "What did you say your name was, Mister?" but he made no answer. He kept the pony at a walk and circled the herd and in a quick flare of lightning saw the cottonwood stand. Once inside the trees he could make out the white covering of the chuck wagon and the smoking fire.

Half a dozen men lay huddled under the wagon and on the far side of the clearing a tarp was stretched into a makeshift lean-to. Around the grass men lay rolled in their blankets, their hats covering their faces, and one man had left his bed and was trying to prod life into the fire. He glanced up indifferently when Dandridge rode in, then straightened suddenly and said, "My God, it's Mr. Dandridge!"

He came forward and Dandridge swung out of the saddle and took Tod Waller's extended hand. Waller let go quickly and backed off again, and the men started getting out of the bedrolls. They rose silently and a few nodded to Dandridge and kept glancing toward the lean-to at the back of the clearing. Inside the wagon the cook yelled "Shut up."

Someone whispered "Dandridge," and in a second the man's head appeared at the front opening. Waller had gone back to prodding the fire, his gaze fixed on the lean-to.

Chet Dreyfuss came out from under the tarp then, fumbling with his slicker. He said, "What the hell's going on?" Then he saw Dandridge and stopped. Dandridge moved away from the sorrel, one hand working at the slicker clasps, and brought the holstered gun clear. Dreyfuss saw that and stepped out of the growing light.

He was a tall man, heavier than Dandridge, with great bull shoulders and no softness about him. The fire glow tinseled his white hair and made harder shadows along the tight lines of his face. He held the slicker with one hand, and the other hand lay forward of his gun, but his voice was friendly when he said: "Didn't figure to see you so soon, Frank."

"No, I guess not," Dandridge said evenly. "Maybe you didn't expect to see me at all. I met your man in some town back in Texas. He's dead."

Dreyfuss dropped his glance, then brought it up again quickly. "I don't know what you mean, Frank," he said. He kept his voice level and a forced curiosity showed in his eyes.

Dandridge let it go for a minute and ran his gaze over the campground, sizing up the men. He knew most of them, the old DD ranch hands, the cook, and the young kid, Pete Handley, who had left the remuda and come into the clearing. But there were faces that held no recognition for him. He saw a kid edge off from the group and take a stand closer to Dreyfuss, and he said, "I see you've got a new man, Chet. Tell him to stay where he is."

Dreyfuss stiffened and his mouth set into a hard, somber line. "You're not running this outfit any more," he said harshly. "These men take orders from me."

"Maybe not," Dandridge told him calmly. "But you've got my cows standing on that grass out there. I'll have a say about them, Chet."

"No," Dreyfuss said, his voice a loud, angry shout. He threw down the slicker and came around the fire. He stood in front of Dandridge, taller than Dandridge, and his skin had turned red over his weather-beaten face and his eyes were narrow-lidded and resentful. Dandridge could see the tightness of the thick neck and he saw the muscles work in the man's shoulder. He took a step backward warily.

"No," Dreyfuss repeated, his tone quieter now. "You've got no say here at all. Five years is too long to stay away. I built this herd up, not you. I fought the skinners and the rustlers and I'll not see a man take it away from me now."

"I only want my share, Chet," Dandridge said uselessly. "And I'd have been back sooner if I could, you know that."

The words had no effect on Dreyfuss. His stare pressed hard against Dandridge and he said: "It wasn't my fault. I couldn't help it if you went to prison for shootin' a man in the back."

DANDRIDGE met the onset of the man's gaze. His mind went back to those five years, the cold greyness of the prison, Tal Fettle with a hole in his back and a chunk out of his sides where the buzzards had eaten, and this man, Chet Dreyfuss. He had stopped caring about it once; someone had killed Tal Fettle, it was as simple as that, and that five years had taken the caring from him. But now the pieces began to move together: Dreyfuss throwing the herd on the trail early, the rider on the Double D horse, and that kid who stood to one side and was quick to back up Dreyfuss. And there was the other man, the one on night herd who had found something familiar in his name. Trouble could come that way, he knew, and he made his slow estimate of the scene and then said carefully, "I didn't kill Tal Fettle, Chet. You know that. You know it better than anyone else because you were there."

Dreyfuss' jaw fell and for a moment he stood dead still, only his eyes betraying his anger. Then his fist shot out and Dandridge took the blow on the side of his head and fell backwards. He sat up, seeing Dreyfuss charge at him and he got as far as his knees when the man's body crashed into him. He rolled away from the driving legs, trying to pull free of the slicker, and Dreyfuss came in on top of him, his fists beating into his face. He grabbed the man by the middle and hauled himself

up; he felt Dreyfuss relax for an instant and he leaped clear. Dreyfuss followed him, his face tight-drawn with hate. The rain had soaked his hair and flowed unhindered down his forehead. Dandridge felt his returning blow slide off the wet skin. He drove a right hand to Dreyfuss' belly and saw him double up; he caught him with his knee as he came down and heard the man's choking groan.

Dreyfuss started to slip and he laid his weight heavily on Dandridge, and Dandridge tried to move back and found himself pinned. He sent two blows into the man's side without effect; Dreyfuss forced him back and then suddenly brought his head up in a quick, jerking motion. It caught Dandridge on the chin, buckling his knees, and Dreyfuss let go and slammed his hand full to the face. Dandridge rocked back and came forward again, sliding under the next blow.

He shook his head, trying to clear the dullness of his brain, and found an opening. His fist made a sharp crack when it struck against Dreyfuss' face, and he stepped in closer, throwing his shoulder behind the punch. For a moment Dreyfuss took the blows helplessly; blood made a sudden spurt from his nose and he put one hand up in a vain effort to cover his face. Dandridge felt the strength draining from his arms, and he tried to maneuver for one final, telling blow. He lunged forward, and, as he did so, Dreyfuss made a grab for his arm, and with a great heave sent him pitching downward. He hit the fire-bed and rolled out of it and came up on one knee, waiting.

But Dreyfuss made no move toward him. He stood with his arms hanging, open-mouthed and gulping for air. Dandridge got up and started around the fire, and heard the click of a gun hammer then. He stopped, turning, and saw the gun as the kid came out from the darkened edge of the clearing.

Dreyfuss said: "All right, Frank. You've had your way. But it won't do you any good. It won't get you one head of Double D cattle."

The kid had him well covered and Dandridge let the tenseness work slowly from his body. His eyes made a survey of the men standing in the dim light near the chuck wagon, but he couldn't make out their faces. None of them moved, but finally Tod Waller came out from the cottonwoods and took a hesitating step toward the fire.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dandridge," he said uncertainly. "We're glad to see yuh back. But this ain't our fight. Mr. Dreyfuss, here, he's bossin' this outfit, and we can't. . . ."

"I know," Dandridge interrupted, motioning him back with his hand. "I understand."

The thin-bearded kid had moved beside Dandridge and slipped the gun from his holster. He looked inquiringly at Dreyfuss, and Dreyfuss said, "See if he's got a rifle," and then to Dandridge, "We're going to Abilene, Dandridge, but you're not goin' along. If you try to follow, I'll leave you dead where you fall."

Dandridge was silent. He waited while one of the men brought the sorrel over and slipped the Winchester from the boot. The man from the night herd rode in and joined Dreyfuss near the fire, staying loose and hunched in the saddle. The kid rode his horse out from the dripping cottonwoods and motioned Dandridge to mount up. Dandridge stepped to the leather; the sorrel stood wearily, its head held low and unmoving. From the fire Dreyfuss said, "I'm letting you live, Frank. Only don't come foolin' with me again. You won't get one head of Double D beef, and you'll get a slug in your belly if you try."

Dandridge turned the pony around, the two men following. Behind him Dreyfuss' warning voice cut above the beating of the rain, but he didn't listen to the words. The tiredness struck at him heavily, almost stilling the deep, vital anger. His hand

went to his holster, touching its emptiness, and from the darkness the kid saw that motion and said, "You sure we got all his guns, Wes?"

"We've got 'em," the man Wes answered.

"He might have a hideout." The kid's voice was a high, cracking sound.

"Don't be a fool," Wes told him gruffly.

The assurance came back to the kid and he slid in close and laid an open-hand slap on the rump of the sorrel. They were beyond the cottonwoods now, threading their way past the edge of the herd. They went two hundred yards beyond the trees where the man called Wes reined in. His shape was a dim, near-unseen form against the unbreaking darkness of the prairie. He said, "All right, Dandridge, ride south and don't turn back."

Dandridge jerked the reins and the sorrel took a hesitating step. The delay was enough for the kid; his horse slammed in close and Dandridge felt the loop drop over his shoulders.

He got one arm free and tried to pull out of the rope and the kid backed off, tightening up. The man named Wes rode in and felt the rope strike against the neck of his horse and said: "Kid, what the hell you doin'? You'll scare those cows clear out of the country!"

The kid made no answer. Wes tried to grab the rope and it burned through his hands as Dandridge came out of the saddle. The point of Dandridge's shoulder hit the ground, and the rope went slack for a moment.

He staggered up and was immediately jerked off his feet again. He went down on his side, his one hand grasping the rope, and the kid's pony broke out of the trot. Something struck him in the side and he bounced clear of it, his face digging into the grass. He tried to keep his head up and then the rock caught him near the temple and his body sagged and went dead weight against the straining of the pony. . . .

THE sun was already over the cottonwoods when Dandridge woke up. He lay on his back, the pain throbbing in his head, his body warm and still wet from the last night's rain. The sky was clear now . . . a few thin clouds drifted at the far rim of the prairie . . . and the grass was empty except for the sorrel grazing a hundred yards off. He came up to a sitting position, feeling the tenderness of his body, and made a straining effort to stand. The stiffness left him in a few moments and when he approached the horse it took a step away and went to cropping again.

A canteen hung from the saddle, but it was almost empty and the tepid water did little to the dryness of his mouth. He made a cursory check of the sorrel's legs and stopped near the animal's head, rubbing its nose and staring off across the prairie. A faint breeze stirred the grass and bent it down in long, sloping waves. He could see nothing on the blankness of the plain, but he remembered the trail herd he had passed the day before. They would have guns there, and he still had money in his pocket if they needed that. Afterward, Abilene would lie ahead of him again. How far he didn't know, but his lack of knowledge brought the urgency back to him. He stepped to the leather, felt the sorrel move under him, and put it to a lope along the trail heading southward.

When he found the herd that afternoon he could see that it had stampeded. The main bunch was held in tight near the battered chuck-wagon, but riders were coming in from all directions with the strays. He rode into the camp and dismounted and stood for a minute viewing the wreckage. The wagon boss was propped back against a broken saddle, drinking coffee and cursing at the hot edge of the cup. Dandridge went over and crouched down beside him. The man glanced up and said with disgust, "You passed us yesterday. You lost?"

"I ran into a little trouble," Dandridge told him guardedly. "I need a gun. I came

back here thinking maybe you'd have one."

The man's eyes went to the empty holster and he glared openly. He drank from the cup again, making loud, sucking noises, and his eyes narrowed from the heat of the liquid. He seemed to ignore Dandridge's request and said, "How far is it to Abilene, Mister?"

"I don't know. Never been up this way. Can't be far though."

The wagon boss tipped the cup and sent the remaining coffee spilling to the ground. His mouth was a long, thick scowl as he struggled to his feet. "Could be to hell and back, as far as I'm concerned. I never saw a herd run so much," he reflected. "All right, Mister. You can have a gun. We'll catch up with you in Abilene, if we ever get there." He turned to the busted chuck wagon, yelled "Cookie," and the man working there came around the corner and stood waiting. "Give him a gun, Cookie," he told him, and walked away, his boots scuffing angrily at the dirt.

The cook made his way inside the wagon and came out with a wooden box. He took a Pony Express pistol from it and handed it to Dandridge. Dandridge shook his head and said: "I have forty-four cartridges. I'd rather have a forty-four if you've got one."

There were two other weapons in the box and the cook reluctantly picked up a wood-butted Colt .44 and offered it. Dandridge took it, bounced it in his hand a little to feel the weight, and let the cylinder fall open. He brought the extra cartridges from his trouser pocket, inserted five, and snapped the cylinder shut again. The cook, watching him closely, said, "A dangerous thing, a gun. Pays a man to be careful with it."

"Maybe," Dandridge answered. He looked down at the pistol, laying it flat in the palm of his hand, then turned it back to check the hammer pull. "Maybe," he said again. "But me, I've got no such notion."

He turned away from the cook and crossed the littered camp to the waiting pony. He swung into the saddle, touched spurs lightly and pointed north again, the sorrel pressing hard against the increasing wind. Under the hot sun the ground had begun to dry, and the sand swirled across the trail again, cutting at his skin and turning his eyes raw. Hunger made its tight grip in his stomach and he thought once about the trail camp behind him, and drove the spurs harder to the heaving flanks of the sorrel. Somewhere off ahead of him now was a town called Abilene, and after that there would be a man called Dreyfuss.

The town lay on the lee side of a hillock and Dandridge reined in the sorrel atop the long rise of ground. Below him Abilene's street ran its short course and faded again into the grassland. A black, fresh-painted engine stood at the siding and the sun made blinking flashes on its trimmings. In the pens, the cattle were a close-pressing, mottled mass of backs and horns. A few steers stood at the end of the street, and a dust billow rose up from their fidgeting. Dandridge reached for cigarettes and paper, remembered that he had none, and started the pony down the slope. As he did so, he saw a rider swing out from behind a building and hurry his mount up the street. He stopped again, brought the Colt out and slipped the sixth cartridge into the empty chamber. His eyes followed the kid until he had turned the wide corner of the street and disappeared.

THERE was a group of Double D riders in front of the hotel when Dandridge approached it. He dismounted and tied up at the rack and Tod Waller came out to meet him. Dandridge worked the stiffness out of his legs and listened to Waller saying: "We're off the trail now, Mr. Dandridge. Dreyfuss let us go. We ain't been paid yet, but we got to thinkin'. We'll give you a hand if you want it."

"You can cover my back, Tom," Dandridge told him, glancing down the street. "He'll have those two gunnies."

Waller built a cigarette and when he was through he handed the makings to Dandridge. Dandridge tapered the smoke and bent for Waller to light it. Waller said, "He's down at the Chicago cattle office, with Wes Briggs. I saw the kid ride through here a minute ago."

Dandridge pulled deeply on the cigarette. Up the street a steer lowed and the wind whipped the noise down to them, and the jingle of spurs was a distinct sound. He finished the cigarette and ground it under his boot, and caught Waller's friendly smile and returned it thinly. He moved past the hotel and when he hit the sidewalk stepped out onto the edge of the street.

Down the plaza he could see the bold sign: *Chicago Cattle Company,* and he saw the kid sitting mounted in front of the office. Chet Dreyfuss and the man named Wes came out and stood on the sidewalk for a moment, their gazes turned up the street; Dreyfuss said something to the kid, unheard against the wind, and the kid spurred around and came dashing at Dandridge. He was headed for the alley, but he came straight on until he was fifty feet away, then swerved off suddenly and threw a shot chunking at Dandirdge's feet.

He made the alley and came back again, his horse dancing excitedly. A bullet made its soft slap at wood behind Dandridge's head. A window broke and glass tinkled to the board sidewalk. Dandridge had the gun out now, taking his time. He squeezed off the shot and the kid's horse bucked from under its rider. The kid lit on his back and stood up quickly, then his legs went limber and he pitched full length in the alley.

Dandridge eased the hammer back and faced down the street. Wes had moved to the far sidewalk and was edging flat along the front of the buildings. Dandridge's single shot drove him back, but he came on again at a run and reached the corner. He sent three shots bursting up dust, and Dreyfuss' gun began to sound from the other sidewalk. Dandridge swung that way and out of the corner of his eye saw Wes break across the opening of the alley. He whirled back and fired, twice, and saw Wes stumble and go down.

He tried a shot at the half hidden Dreyfuss, but the man had turned on the sidewalk and was moving away. He got to his horse and started to mount, and Dandridge broke into a run toward him. He stepped down again and fired wildly, and the click of the hammer on the empty chamber then was a loud sound above the wind. He tried to reload and his fingers went useless on him, the cartridges scattering to the ground. He got one in place and brought the gun up, and he made a low, grunting noise when Dandridge's slug struck him in the belly. The gun slid out of his hand and he stood poised momentarily, his eyes widening. Then he fell, his body hitting the ground with a heavy thud, and he kicked one foot out behind him as though getting a better grip on the earth.

Dandridge walked up closer and looked down at him, and instinctively began reloading the Colt. The final weariness took hold of him, loosening his nerves and awakening the hoarse dryness of his throat. As he turned away, people began coming into the street and he went past them without speaking.

In the alley the kid was sitting up now, his face a blank staring mask, and he made no move toward the gun. Dandridge stopped in front of the cattle office, hesitating; he still had to prove that he was the other D of the Double D brand, and there might be some trouble because his partner was lying dead in the street. But there would be plenty of time for that, he knew, and moved on.

Ahead of him the Double D riders had left the hotel and were coming toward him, and a smile made its brief light on Dandridge's face. A drink would taste good now, he thought; a drink and a meal and a good bed. It had been a long, hard ride to Abilene. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

"You got a nasty temper," Jesse said. . . .

THE RANGE THAT HELL FORGOT!

Terror came to Willy's wedding . . . with sixguns for his witnesses, vengeance as his only guest—and sure death siding him all the time!

By FRANK PEACE

THE sun had just completed its golden arc toward the western rim of the land when Willie Kerry stepped from the open door of Nusbaum's Barbershop, cast a careful glance along the sprawled strip of loose dust that was Hondo's main street, then walked diagonally across it to enter Pete Harris' Saloon.

It was one of those summer evenings when the cool breath of a sage scented breeze made a soothing interruption to the scorching heat of the desert's edge. On the south rim of the town a man yelled and cattle lowed by the Texas Pacific loading pens. Toward the residences, a church bell sent up a melodious call, beckoning the gentry to an early worship. Willie halted on the gallery, hearing these sounds, soothed by them, and filled with a sense of peace that had been absent when he entered town two hours before.

Harris' was mildly crowded at this hour. A group of ranchers from the desert's edge made a clannish knot at the far end of the long bar; frock-coated townsmen were mixing business with friendly drinking.

Willie eased himself in beside a tall, blond man with a sweeping mustache and wiggled his finger for his customary beer. Harris mopped his streaming face, sliding the schooner before him. Willie drank with a deep satisfaction.

The blond man smiled faintly and said, "How are things on Pewter Creek, Willie—a little dry?"

"Could stand some rain," Willie acknowledged, setting the beer down. He was a tall man, touching thirty, and hard work had hardened him; the loneliness of the land had worked on him until he carried a half-severe expression around a normally tolerant mouth. "Shipping much this fall, John?"

"Eight hundred head," John Saber said. "Market's down and I want to hold them over on winter feed and ship next year."

Willie shook his head in mock sadness and murmured, "You big money cattleman . . . if I had eight hundred head, I'd be rich." He finished his beer and turned to hook his elbows on the edge of the bar and survey the room. His jeans and brush jacket were patched and faded, still carrying the wrinkles of the clothes line.

Saber noticed this and remarked, "Dance tonight over at the Masonic Hall—or had you heard about it?"

"I heard," Willie said, and lapsed into silence.

Saber grinned behind his mustache and murmured, "When I was a kid back in Tennessee, I used to have a Redbone hound—damndest dog you ever saw. All the time wanting something he couldn't have. I remember the time when that fool dog went all the way over into Arkansas after a Walker he took a fancy to. That dog never did amount to much; couldn't settle down and realize he was getting out of his class all the time."

Willie stiffened and kicked his temper into place. "You're a friend of mine, John. You can say it plainer than that and get away with it."

Saber licked a cigar into shape with great care. "That desert bunch is a strange lot, son. This time you've got your sights set way too high." He held up a hand as Willie tried to interrupt and added, "Louise Dulane is a beauty, I'll admit that, but old Jesse's got his back humped against you. You're just asking for trouble by playing around with her; you're foolish to think otherwise."

Willie grinned and shoved himself away from the bar. "Some men are just naturally born fools." He pulled his battered hat at a rakish angle and sauntered from the saloon.

LONG, black shadows lay between the close-set buildings. Buggies were wheeling into town. They pulled into the lot to the rear of the coutryard, parking in a solid row by the west side of the Masonic Hall. Willie watched this with a studied casualness, coming stiffly alert as three riders boiled into Hondo from the east. They nodded curtly as they trotted by, lean and saddle-pounded, a large anchor brand blazoned on their horses' flanks. He watched them dismount in the archway of the stable and waited as they crossed the street toward him. He was all caution but masked it behind the casual motions of his blunt fingers as he fashioned a cigarette. Lamplight now threw strong fingers of pale light onto the street; the three riders stopped near the bottom step.

Willie lifted his head as one of them spoke. "Long way from home, ain't you?" He had a flat, bold face and he stared at Willie with a naked brazenness.

"Just in to dance with the pretty girls," Willie told him. They stood there in a solid knot—Strang, Pecos and Valverde.

Strang said, "Be careful who you dance with, Kerry."

Willie's eyebrows lifted belligerently. "You pickin' 'em for me?"

"Maybe," Strang said and mounted the steps, Valverde and Pecos at his heels.

Willie waited until the swinging doors blocked them from his view, then moved off the porch. Music filtered out from the Masonic Hall as the musicians struck up a ragged chord and Willie walked toward the gaunt figure lounging in the shadows of Keno Charlie's Saloon.

A match flared with a sudden brightness and George Rudy murmured, "Watch out for those three."

"I'm not blind," Kerry told him and looked up and down the street. A half block away, Loyal Surrency and his wife rounded the corner of the Opera House, the woman turning to speak to the girl behind her. Her soft laugh came to Kerry, a melodious, ringing note, and he glanced at Rudy swathed in the shadows.

There was a rigid expectancy in the tall man, a searching in his pale eyes as the trio drew nearer. As they came abreast, a lamp was lighted in Keno Charlie's and Rudy and Kerry were no longer hidden by the night. Loyal Surrency's head swung around quickly; the girl's laughter died and she studied Rudy in frank appraisal until her mother nudged her. Surrency's voice was even, with no hint of friendliness. "Evening, Kerry." He gave George Rudy a curt nod; they moved on.

Kerry studied Rudy's face as he followed Marilee Surrency with his eyes. Then Kerry dropped his gaze quickly, somehow feeling that he was intruding. Rudy's cigar lay dead between his long fingers. He smiled wanly and murmured, "Even in Hondo we have a dividing line."

"I didn't know it included piano players," Kerry said.

Rudy applied another match to his cigar. The light shone on his embroidered vest and white silk shirt. He whipped the match out and said, "Surrency isn't tone deaf, in fact he comes into Keno Charlie's often to hear me play Chopin and Beethoven, in off hours. However he has an aversion to my sitting in his parlor to play for his daughter. My place is in the saloon. That was established the first evening I tried to call."

"This is a free country," Willie maintained. "A man can take what he wants . . . and earns."

"Is that what you have in mind?" Rudy asked softly.

"Maybe," Willie admitted cautiously. "When I get ready."

"You're very elemental," Rudy said admiringly. "Unfortunately, I am a thinker —prone to lengthy, mental dissertation. I've wondered if a girl like Marilee . . . or Louise, could take it. Suddenly finding themselves without luxuries, I mean."

"One way to find out," Willie murmured.

"A serious step," Rudy counciled. "And if you found out you'd made a mistake, how would you correct it?"

"Never gave it much thought," Willie admitted and stepped from Keno Charlie's porch. A block away, the band swung into *Dixie,* announcing the beginning of the dance. Willie paused to listen for a moment, then asked Rudy, "Comin' over?"

"Later, perhaps," Rudy said and turned back into the saloon. Willie crossed to the other side of the street and walked toward the hall. The building was ablaze with light and colored Japanese lanterns. Dancers made a bobbing mass on the cleared floor and Willie paused in the doorway to watch them. The music pulsed, a deep throbbing beneath the noise of capering feet and laughing women. Sam Harms' bulk half-blocked the door as Willie shouldered past him. He touched the young man on the arm, saying, "No trouble tonight now, Willie." Harms was all stomach beneath the star pinned to his parted vest.

"I just came to have a good time," Willie said and moved away. He crossed to the west wall, halting near the fringe of the stag line. He saw Saber in the middle of the floor, dancing with his wife and searched the crowd until he found Strang

and Pecos in a far corner. Willie stared at them for a long moment, until their heads came up, then he moved onto the floor toward Louise Dulane.

VALVERDE swung her wide as Kerry stepped quickly between them to take her hand, whirling her among the other dancers. She gave Kerry that puzzling half-smile when he looked at her. Her smooth shoulders rose round and bare from her billowing, white gown. She was a full breasted girl, with skin gleaming like pale ivory in the lamplight. Her dark eyes glowed from the piquant frame of her face; her lustrous brown hair was coiled high on her head. Willie murmured, "I don't guess I ever seen you look prettier."

She flushed beneath his candid gaze and said, "I don't think you've ever done anything more foolish. Valverde will settle this before the night's over."

He pulled her against him and laughed, a joy and a recklessness blending within him and the night had no end for him; no danger was as real as the girl in his arms. He came to the side door and wheeled her toward it; then they were outside with the clear night around them, shadows bathing them.

Louise didn't pull away from the arm that encircled her waist. "This is insane, Willie. Father will be furious." Her voice said one thing while her tone told him something else.

Willie Kerry laughed and kissed her. She surrendered to him, answering him with the pressure of her arms. Kerry drew away and pulled in a ragged breath. He took her arm and led her back to the hall. "I'm sure in the mood for dancin'," he told her and whirled her blithely away to the beat of the music.

They threaded their way among the dancing couples; Willie ignored Jesse Dulane's heavy-browed scowl. Valverde had taken a place along the wall, shoving himself away as the music stopped. People eddied around them; Marilee Surrency brushed by him with a quick smile and passed on.

Louise Dulane gripped Willie's arm tightly as Valverde broke off a conversation with her father and shuffled through the crowd toward them. Sam Harms moved then, but Valverde had already stopped before Kerry. "That's my girl you're dancin' with." His voice was low, filled with that hushed tightness that carries below louder voices, bringing with it a ring of chopped silence.

Willie asked Louise, "Are you his girl?"

"No."

Willie's good humor faded. "Drag your picket then. If—"

Sam Harms shoved his bulk between them and pushed Valverde back with a stiffened arm. "Let's just have a nice, quiet time—shall we?"

Valverde wanted to make a fight of it, but he shot a glance at Jesse Dulane and the old man shook his head imperceptibly The squat rider mumbled under his breath and moved away. Willie watched this with a quiet attention and Harms murmured, "You better go, Willie. You're just pullin' the lion's tail."

"Sure," Willie agreed, and took Louise by the arm, leading her outside again. There was a haste in him then, the pressure of time against him and he blurted, "You know I love you, and I know you love me too. Let's ride out of here and go to Wineglass and get married." Louise made a vague motion toward her father and Willie said, "I'm not marryin' him. I'm marryin' you! To hell with his permission. You got to get away from him sometime."

She wanted to; he could see that. She opened her mouth, suddenly confused and said haltingly, "Willie, I—"

"Fine," Willie said quickly. "I like a woman who can make up her mind." He took her hand then and led her from the porch, cutting across the lawn. Trees

blocked out the faint, night light, making the growth of sycamores a solid blackness. Willie halted abruptly as a cigar glowed and died.

John Saber stepped from the shadows and said softly, "So, you're going to do it anyway?" Willie made no immediate answer and Saber chuckled. "Take my rig, over at the livery stable. I'll rent one for Edith and me when we get ready to leave."

"Thank you," Louise said breathlessly, and they left the darkness to cross the street. A solitary lantern hung in the stable's arch and Willie left her in the shadows while he hitched up Saber's team. He emerged a moment later, leading them and handed her into the buggy. Comanche Street was bare when he turned out onto it. He drove toward the north road that led into his place in the badlands, whipping the team into a brisk trot as they passed the hall. There was a burst of excitement in the yard, a flurry of brief action and the strident call of "Fight—fight! George Rudy's fightin' the banker!"

LIGHTS and sound faded behind them; the night swallowed them as he tooled the team over the rutted road. He listened to the clatter of the rig, the solid beat of the horses' hooves, and pondered that one call of "fight."

"What did it mean?" Louise asked.

"I don't know," Willie admitted. "George is about at the end of his rope. Love makes a man do foolish things."

"Does it make you do foolish things?"

Willie shot her a quick look and saw the smile on her face. "Your dad has about ten thousand dollars; I have less than twenty dollars, yet I want his daughter for a wife. Is that foolish?"

"Very," Louise told him, "but I love you for it." She fell silent then, letting the miles drift past them, letting the night wear on. They climbed higher until the desert lay below them, white and stark in the faint moonlight. Three hours later they came to the fork in the road leading to Cardigan's Sunrise spread; the other to Saber's Leaning Seven, and beyond, in the badlands, the Broken Spur, Willie Kerry's one-man ranch.

The altitude lent a chill to the air and Willie halted to throw a robe around her bare shoulders. An hour later they left the road as it cut toward Saber's ranch house, taking a winding course that twisted and slashed its way through rock and scrub pine.

It was after eleven when Willie pulled close to his cabin and dismounted, lifting Louise to the ground. She sagged against him for a moment and he said, "This is as far as we can take the buggy. There's some of my brother's clothes in the cabin. You get into 'em and I'll saddle a couple of horses for us." He pulled her against him then and she came willingly, their lips meeting for a long moment. She was breathless when she broke away and he turned with her to enter and light the lamp.

She looked around, seeing the peeled log walls, the spare furniture. Willie saw this and there was no apology in his voice. "A man can't start out a success." He turned from her then, stopping in the doorway to add, "Don't be long," and moved off toward the barn at a long-legged lope.

The remainder of the night passed swiftly for them, a quick succession of events that at dawn led them toward the desert and Jesse Dulane's ranch. Wineglass was miles behind them, as was the wizened minister who had solemnized the affair. Louise slept in the saddle, her chin bobbing against her chest. Willie dismounted stiffly and lifted her to the ground. They were at the outer fringe of the timber, the desert slightly below and west of them. Dulane's Anchor spread squatted three miles away, now only an indistinct jumble of rough buildings.

Willie kindled a small fire and boiled a

pot of coffee. "Louise," he touched her, bringing her awake and handed her the tin cup. She drank quickly, then handed it back to him, leaning back against the bole of a stunted tree.

"Please let me go in alone, Willie." She watched his face, but he gave no sign that he had heard her. Willie drained the cup, kicked the fire until it was smothered with dirt, and then pulled her to her feet.

"You're not too tired?"

She shook her head as he helped her mount, and they angled off the slope to hit the road a half hour later.

DAWN had blossomed into a full, sunny morning when they finally crossed the ranch yard. Men made a cursing group around the corral as horses were being cut out. Eyes swung to them, then turned back to the business at hand, as they dismounted a few yards from the porch.

Jesse Dulane came from the house, Strang and Valverde at his heels. He gave his daughter a close inspection, then said, "So you gone and done it? Well, I seen it comin', danged if I didn't. Headstrong, that's what you are—just like your mother, but I like a woman that way." He made a motion toward Strang with his head and said curtly, "Get on with the work."

Strang stepped off the porch, Valverde moving to follow him, but Jesse laid a hand on his arm, holding him. "Not you," he said. "You got a grudge and a man packin' a grudge ain't worth a damn to me or himself unless he gets it out of his system. You been wantin' to tangle with Kerry—all right, here's Kerry. Tangle with him."

Valverde made no attempt to hide his eagerness. He took a long step toward Kerry only to be halted by the old man's voice. "Take that danged gun off! I won't have you losin' your head and pluggin' my brand new son-in-law just because you got a nasty temper."

Valverde let the gun belt drop and stepped from the porch only to be knocked asprawl by Kerry's driving fist. Jesse snorted in disgust and watched Valverde struggle to his feet. "Hell," Jesse told him, "this ain't no waltz!"

Valverde's temper was a live thing and he let it out, boring in with the ferocity of a wild animal. Willie withstood the brunt of the attack, then leveled the squat man with a damaging uppercut. Louise grabbed her father's arm, shouting, "Stop them! Make them stop!"

"What for?" Jesse said. "Man was made to fight over a woman. It's as natural as the sun and the wind. Look at 'em go at it!"

Kerry took a slashing fist across the mouth to get to Valverde, closing one of the man's eyes with a meaty hook. Valverde went down on one knee and Kerry stepped back, waiting for him to get up.

Jesse yelled, "Stomp him—stomp him!"

Kerry's breath was ragged and he pulled for wind. "You . . . fight your . . . way. I'll fight him . . . mine."

Valverde made his feet then, picking up a fist-sized rock from the yard. Jesse shouted at him but he ignored the old man, lifting his hand to strike. A gun blasted behind Kerry and he jumped as Valverde bent over, clutching a bullet-creased hip. Jesse holstered his .38-40.

"Once," Jesse said, "I could have shot the danged thing outa' his hand, but my eyes are goin' out on me, I guess." He gave Valverde a hard glance and muttered, "Git to the bunkhouse and have Cookie patch that up." The old man's face was hard and his mouth, behind his ragged, gray mustache, was pulled into a thin line.

Willie pawed at his bruised mouth and watched the old man. Louise said, "I'm married now, father. I've come after my things."

"You're wearin' 'em," Jesse told her. Louise took a backward step and gasped. "Don't say I didn't tell you. You know how I feel about you marryin' some brush-

popper. I wanted you to be a lady, but you prefer him. All right—start out right then, flat broke and standin' in the only clothes you wear."

"That's carrying bein' tough a little too far," Willie said.

"Is it now?" Jesse wanted to know. "I fed this young beauty on milk and honey . . . maybe she's a little soft. She's on her own now and she made her bed; let's see if she's woman enough to lay in it. She either has gumption or she ain't. Time will tell. I give her six months to come crawlin' back, and when she does, don't ever come after her, 'cause she only gets one chance to come back."

"She'll never come back to you," Willie prophesied.

"Won't she now?" Jesse taunted. "How long do you think you'll stay around when things start gettin' tough for you?"

"Now it comes out," Willie said tightly. "All right, confine the fight to me. Don't drag her into it." He took a ragged breath, trying to get control of his temper. "You make a big show of fightin' fair—what can you do to me unless you step outside the law?"

Jesse smiled and waved them away with his hand. "Go on—go home with him. Go back to that hole in the wall and the loneliness and the empty bellies."

Louise stared at her father and murmured, "I don't think I ever knew you before. I think I sincerely hate you now."

A look of grief flitted across the old man's eyes, then was gone. Willie took Louise by the arm, leading her to the waiting horses, wondering about it. They mounted and rode from the yard.

CHAPTER TWO

Texas Test

THE first month passed happily, but Willie felt the added pressure. He rode into the hills for three days, returning on the fourth, driving four raw-boned steers before him. He drove them into Hondo and sold them, buying her cloth and things for the house with the twenty-eight dollars. Louise made no complaint, even appeared happy, but he saw the faraway look in her eyes when she thought he wasn't looking; he felt the shoulder-shaking sobs in the night when she supposed him sound asleep beside her. Willie recognized a mistake when he made one and he had the solution at his fingertips, but he lacked the will power to take her home, to put her away from him forever.

The supper hour passed, as had many others, with her laughter filling the small room, her beauty a tonic after a hard day's work. Willie shoved his plate away from him and fashioned a smoke with great care. Louise watched him, then said, "Tell me about it, Willie. I think it would help both of us."

He was surprised but masked it quickly. "I don't know the words. I'm afraid I might use the wrong ones and then I'd hurt you."

Her dark eyes glowed and she said simply, "Just say the words. I'll know what meanings to attach to them."

There was a long silence, a thoughtful drawing on his cigarette, then, "I been wanting to talk to you about how it will be for us next year, our future here—but there won't be any future. Oh, I guess you love me, but love ain't enough, is it?"

She looked at him solemnly and said honestly, "I don't know, Willie. Most of the time it is, but then again, I get lonely. I guess I'm not the kind of a woman who *likes* to be poor."

Willie sighed deeply and crossed to the door to throw out his cigarette. "I guess that sums it up all right," he said quietly, and went outside for a drink of water. He paused by the well curbing, hearing the night sounds around him, and half-turned to re-enter the cabin when the sheriff said, "Evenin', Willie."

Kerry whirled quickly, seeing them then in the darkness, the squat, blurred shapes of horses and riders. "Who's with you?" Willie forced his voice to be calm.

"Just Ron Banks, my deputy," Harms said, "and Strang, Pecos and Valverde."

"What do you want?" Kerry asked and Louise stepped to the door, standing framed in the lamplight. "Get back in the house," Kerry told her and the door closed.

"I got a writ here," Harms said. "We want to inspect your cattle for rustled stock."

Kerry snorted. "There ain't been no rustlin' around here since Saber cleaned Bodry's bunch out ten years ago. Besides, a man don't need no writ to look at another man's herd. What's behind all this?"

"I'm just doin' my job," Harms maintained. "Dulane thought, seein' how you and him is sorta on the outs, it would be better to have the court order."

"All right," Willie said shortly. "We'll start in the mornin'."

"'Fraid not," Strang said easily. "The old man's gonna ship day after tomorrow 'n he wants all he can get."

"What the devil!" Willie's temper threatened to get the better of him. "I've got on to sixty head in this brush. How the devil do you expect me to cut them out in time?"

"Gotta be done," Harms said. "Court order."

"I get it," Willie said. "He wants to see me work day and night, is that it?"

"Take it any way you want," Strang said. "Go get your horse and kiss your wife good-bye for a few days."

Willie glowered at them in the darkness, then went into the house. He emerged ten minutes later, sullen and silent, and crossed to the barn.

HE RODE in on the morning of the third day, dirty, and with a half-inch stubble on his face. Louise met him at the door. He spent ten minutes at the horse trough before slipping into clean clothes and putting his razor away. She had a meal ready for him and he ate in silence. Louise waited until he lifted his coffee cup, then blurted, "I hate him—I hate him!"

Willie shook his head. "No, you know that isn't so. It's just that he's alone now and I guess that can hurt when you get older."

"How many of his cattle did you find?"

"None. I knew there wouldn't be any, but I had to look." Willie scrubbed a hand across his face and stood up. "I could sure use some sleep, but there's something I have to do in town. Guess I'd better get it done."

He smiled at her but she shook her head, saying, "I'll wait here."

He went out to his horse then, wondering if she was ashamed to face her friends with only a homemade dress to show for her married life. Willie rode slowly from the yard.

He paused on the bluff overlooking Hondo. It was a sight he never tired of seeing, but, somehow, today it failed to raise his spirits. He nudged the horse with his heels and an hour later came onto the main street. Buggies and buckboards were thick along the hitchracks and it was only then that he realized it was Saturday. He passed the loading pens, noticing that they were empty. He felt an idea brush him and moved over to the agent's window to ask, "Jesse Dulane ship yesterday?"

The agent looked surprised. "Why no, Willie. Beef dropped another quarter. He wouldn't ship now."

Willie nodded his thanks and trotted the length of the street. Edith Saber called to him and he swung his horse to dismount before her. "Willie," she said, "John told me to ask you if you could spare some time. He wanted to put on another crew and needs a good boss. There's the extra house that goes in with the deal."

Willie read nothing in her voice, but he felt something there. He lowered his head

as though deep in thought, thinking, *It sure must show plain enough.* He looked up at her and murmured, "I'll think it over," and tipped his hat, walking on down the street.

Loyal Surrency's bank door stood open and Willie walked in. He nodded to the cashier and swung the low mahogany gate aside to enter the inner office. Surrency sat behind his desk like an overgrown bullfrog. He glanced at Willie and his eyes clouded, as though he had been reminded of something unpleasant.

Willie pulled a chair back and sat down. Surrency said briefly, "What is it this time?"

Willie flushed and said, "This time? I only been in here once before and that was to get the loan in the first place."

"A little dry this year," Surrency said. "Heard you'd been having trouble."

Willie had no wish to discuss it and made a vague motion with his hand. "It comes and goes," he told the banker.

"Seen your friend, Rudy?"

"Why, no," Willie said, something in the man's voice turning him cautious.

"When are you going to be able to start paying again? You're three months behind now."

"I know that," Willie admitted. "I been waitin' for the beef market to climb just like everyone else. I mean to pay, but that isn't what I came in to talk about. I need a little ready cash—maybe fifty, seventy-five dollars. I'd kinda' like to buy my wife a few things."

Surrency smiled then and Kerry stiffened, knowing it to be a strange thing. Surrency put his beefy hands together and said, as if each word gave him great pleasure, "I've put a good deal of thought into your note, Kerry, and I've come to the conclusion that the best procedure would be foreclosure."

Kerry slapped the arms of his chair. "That's a little sudden, ain't it? You gave me a six months' extension on that note."

"I've changed my mind," Loyal Surrency said flatly.

"Mighty convenient, ain't it?"

"Just what do you mean?"

"I don't exactly know," Kerry admitted. "I'd like to know what the hell *you* mean."

"I had trouble with a man," Loyal said. "I feel that you're responsible." Kerry's face was puzzled and Surrency supplied, "George Rudy. He took a fancy to my daughter. Naturally, I object and I believe everything would have been all right if you hadn't seen fit to encourage him. You were talking to him the night of the dance, then you ran away with Dulane's daughter. The combination was sufficient to cause Rudy's unforgivable words to me."

"Wasn't there some kind of fight?" Willie asked pointedly.

Surrency's face was livid as he snapped, "Yes, dammit. The pup had the effrontery to demand satisfaction."

"I take it you got stomped?"

Surrency scowled and Willie laughed. He felt he could afford to at this point. Surrency said coldly, "Get your things together and move off that property or I'll have the sheriff move you off."

"So Rudy licked you," Willie murmured. "You weren't the cut-proud bully boy you thought you were after all. What about Marilee? Did she cradle your fat head and tell you she'd never see the brute again, or was she woman enough to go to him?"

Surrency surged to his feet, pawing at Kerry. Willie's temper filled him. He stretched Loyal Surrency flat on his back with one punch.

There was a great thrashing sound from the other room as the teller crowded through the door to pick the banker up. Surrency's mouth was bleeding and he shook his fist at Kerry, "I'll have the sheriff after you for this!"

"Go to hell," Willie told him and stalked out to stand on the boardwalk. He stood

there letting his anger die and watched John Saber go into Keno Charlie's. Willie felt the whim nudge him and crossed the street.

CHAPTER THREE

The Showdown

SABER stood belly flat against the bar and Kerry sided him. Saber shot him a quick glance and commented, "Hot today, isn't it?"

"Thanks for the job," Willie said, and watched Saber's face.

The man was nimble-witted and an excellent poker player but Willie caught the flitting puzzlement in his eyes before Saber lifted his beer and murmured, "Think nothin' of it . . . nothing at all." He set the schooner down and said, "Have one." Willie shook his head and Saber asked, "Wife object?"

"No," Willie said. "It don't seem right, somehow—me here havin' a beer and her home with one dress to her name. A homemade one at that."

Saber studied his reflection in the polished bar and murmured, "I know how it is."

The batwings squeaked and heads turned. Jesse Dulane crossed to the far end of the bar. Willie straightened and walked over to him. Jesse took a beer from the bartender and said, "From the way you're walkin' stiff-legged, I can see you're just honin' for a tussle."

"Ain't I got good reason?"

"Maybe you have," Jesse told him, "maybe you ain't. But it's too hot to wrassle or crack each other with our knuckles."

Saber lifted his drink and slid along the bar until he was within three feet of Willie. His voice was quiet but the warning was there. "Back off, Willie."

Kerry turned his head quickly, not understanding this, and murmured, "This is none of your damned business, John."

"You're honestly mistaken," Saber told him. "This is my business. Come on back and have a beer before your hot head gets you into trouble."

Willie looked around the room, returning the stares, and followed Saber to the other end of the bar. He waited until the bartender drew another beer and then said softly, "I come because you got a reason. I know you'll tell me."

Saber let out a long breath. "Give the old man a chance to know you. He just wants to find out what kind of a man you are."

"Hell," Willie said impatiently, "why don't he ask around? People here have known me for ten-twelve years."

"You know better than that," Saber pointed out. "A man doesn't take another man's word on those things. He finds out for himself. I told you once they were a clannish lot—give him a little time."

"All right," Willie sighed. "No bloodshed." He lapsed into silence for a moment, then said, "I don't see George Rudy around."

"Gone," Saber said. "Went to Dallas the morning after his fight with Loyal Surrency. Went to Surrency's house, big as life, and took the girl. I guess she was eager enough to go."

"That takes money."

"True," Saber agreed, "but he had some. Keno Charlie gave him three hundred to sweeten the pot." He leaned on the bar and looked around the room. He stared thoughtfully at his hands for a long moment, then said, "Speakin' of money, I saw you come out of Loyal's bank. A little short?"

"I wanted to get her a few things," Willie said quietly.

"That's not good enough. If you needed it for anything but that I'd let you have it, but she's got to start at the bottom if she wants to grow up."

Kerry stiffened and said brittlely, "I've

heard some rough talk lately. I don't want to hear any more—not even from you."

"Don't be a fool, Willie," Saber said explosively. "Can't you see what Jesse's doing?"

"No," Willie said hotly, "and I don't want to."

"Better come off the boil," Saber advised. "Losing your temper won't help anything."

"Wait a minute," Willie warned. "You and I have had some rough times together but that don't give you the right to stand back and pick my wife to pieces."

Saber drained his glass with a few quick swallows and wiped the foam from his mouth with his handkerchief. He gave Willie a straight look, said, "Excuse my big mouth," and walked out.

Willie Kerry drew an aimless design on the bar's wet surface with a blunt finger. The bartender came up to him and asked, "Want something?" Kerry shook his head and went outside to mount his horse.

LOUISE KERRY bent over the steaming tub; Willie carried wood for the fire. Clothes hung wetly from a lariat strung from the roof of the well cover to the far corner of the cabin. The heat lay heavy on the land and her gingham dress was dark with sweat across the back and shoulders. Willie walked up behind her and held her hands from further rubbing on the board. "That's enough," he told her firmly. "Let the rest go dirty."

Her face was flushed from the heat and her hair lay awry. He crossed to the well to draw a bucket of cool water. They drank gratefully of its coolness. Finally, they sat on the steps, close, but Willie had the distinct feeling they were growing apart. She let the silence spread out for a moment, then asked, "Why did you go into town?"

"Money."

"Are we broke?"

"No," Willie said, "but there were some things I wanted to buy for you."

"I have all I need," Louise said softly, and Willie looked at her, knowing she lied to save his pride. He sat with his head down and remained that way until she touched him gently on the knee. He raised his head in time to see three horsemen leave the rocks, angling toward his cabin. Willie stood up and went into the cabin. When he came out, he was wearing his gun.

Strang, Pecos and Valverde stopped twenty feet away and looked around them. Strang said, "I never knew you to carry a gun, Kerry."

"Before your time," Kerry told him and gave them a studied attention.

Valverde shifted on his horse and gave Pecos a knowing look. Kerry caught this and asked, "Say what you want, then drag it."

Strang stared at him. "Unfriendly cuss, ain't you?"

"Speak up or ride out!"

Strang chuckled deep in his throat and looked at Louise. "Your pap wants to know if you've got a craw full yet."

Louise stiffened. "Is he getting impatient?"

Strang shook his head. "I wouldn't know, ma'am."

Willie felt his temper push at him, and Valverde said, "I can't get over it . . . you packin' a gun."

"Leave him alone," Strang warned. "We don't want trouble."

"Speak for yourself," Valverde told him and leaned on the saddlehorn, staring at Kerry with a wide grin slashed across his face. "Is it for show, or do you really shoot it now and then?"

"Take it easy," Strang cautioned, not liking the expression on Willie's face. He gave Louise another pointed look and said, "You sure you won't change your mind?"

She shook her head and Strang turned.

"Don't be in a hurry," Valverde coaxed. "I want to see this fella shoot. Go ahead, bronc-stomper—shoot."

"Get that big mouth outa here," Willie warned quietly.

Strang made a move toward Valverde, but the man reached across his stomach and casually drew his gun. Willie waited until the muzzle was swinging toward him, then pulled, spilling the squat man from the saddle with one, quick shot. The echo bounded and rebounded through the hills and Willie advised, "Pick him up and get him out of here—you with him."

Strang and Pecos dismounted hurriedly and draped the groaning man across his horse. They mounted with no hostile move and Strang said, "This isn't the first time you've smelled powder."

"And it won't be the last," Willie informed him. He stood there and watched them ride out, then went into the cabin and hung up his gun. Louise watched him closely. Trouble crowded Willie until he no longer knew where he had made his first mistake.

He took her gently by the arms, pulling her to her feet. His voice was humble. "Louise, a man like me ain't nothin', but it takes something like this to make him see it. I'm guilty of loving you—I never should have done that, but it was something I couldn't help. I never should've brought you here, made a slavey of you—not giving you anything but hard work and trouble. Your father was right—you belong with him and his money. I'll take you back."

"Have I nothing to say about it?" Louise asked softly.

"I guess," Willie told her, "that you're the sweetest thing in this world and you'd say a lot of things to save my pride. Well, it just ain't worth savin'! I'm gonna take you back."

"If you do," Louise said, "there will never be another chance."

"I don't deserve another chance," Willie stated, and went to the barn to hitch up his buckboard. Half way there, he turned to look at her—slowly. . . .

DULANE'S Anchor still looked the same to him as he watched it materialize from the ledge overlooking the desert, but somehow it seemed sharper, more clear. He glanced at Louise but her face was set, and she stared straight ahead, saying nothing; the silence had remained unbroken throughout the entire ride.

Willie rapped the horse and they moved toward the loose cluster of buildings. Jesse Dulane sat on his wide porch, Strang on the steps before him like a faithful dog. They paced the yard slowly. Finally, Willie hopped down and lifted his arms for Louise.

Jesse watched this with no change of expression. Willie asked, "How is Valverde?"

Strang's eyes widened and he said, "I'm surprised you asked. He'll be all right. Your bullet gouged out a helluva hunk of meat but it'll grow back."

The answer satisfied Kerry and he looked at the old man. Jesse Dulane watched his daughter. He noticed her work-roughened hands, the much washed dress and asked bluntly, "Get your bellyful of hard work, backfat and beans?"

"No," Louise said heatedly. "He just decided that I'm too good to be his wife."

"Ha!" Jesse said and slapped his thigh. "He did, did he? Well, let me tell you something, Kerry. My wife and I came into this country thirty years ago with one cow, a horse, a Sharps rifle, and a lot of ambition. She lived hard, played hard, and by God, we loved hard—but she was all woman—and my daughter's the same."

Louise gave Willie a long look and said, "Understand something before I walk in that door—I love you more than anything in this world, even my father. I felt homesick, yes, but it was a natural thing. I was proud of you and I still am. But you aren't content to just have me love you. I never told you this, Willie, but I would have lain in the dirt and waited for you if you'd wanted me to."

She opened the door and her father spoke sharply, "Remember what I said, girl! Set foot in that house now and you've give up . . . there ain't no turnin' back after that door closes."

"We'll see," Louise murmured and went into the house.

Kerry stared after her and the old man chuckled, "It's all like a game of poker, sonny, but I won. You held all the cards and I bluffed you out. I ain't no fool; I knowed I couldn't keep her forever, and I wanted her to have a man. You're a man, but you weren't quite man enough or you'd never give her up. I played a poor hand right into a winner."

The screen door opened and Louise stepped to the porch, Jesse's double-barreled shotgun cradled in the crook of her arm. She pointed the twin bores at the old man. Jesse Dulane straightened and said, "Hey, be careful with that danged thing—it's loaded!"

"I know it," Louise said firmly. "You also taught me how to shoot it."

Jesse started to stand up but she motioned him down with the gun. "Get him a horse, Strang." The man got uncertainly to his feet, then moved off when he looked into her eyes.

"You're an old, hard-headed goat, and I love you, but this time one of your lessons is going to backfire in your face. You put me out with only the clothes on my back, trying to find out if I was a woman or not. You gave Willie hell to see if he was your kind of man; well, now you can have some of your own medicine."

"You can't do this to me, honey! I own this place!"

"I hold a shotgun and in Texas that's better than a fist full of deeds—I've heard you say so yourself!" She glanced at Strang as he appeared with Jesse's pony.

Louise motioned with the shotgun and Jesse stood up wearily and crossed to the horse. He pulled himself up into the saddle with a grunt and watched her, a thinly-veiled pride in his eyes. "Get going," Louise told him. "Ride until your pants fall to pieces and when Willie and I get ready, we'll send Strang after you and you can come back. Swallowing your pride won't choke you . . . you'll find that out." She turned to Willie then and added, "This is your last chance too, buster. In the future, when I say I love you—I mean just that."

Jesse Dulane watched this with a thin grin across his old face. He looked at Louise proudly and murmured, "Dammit, girl, if you was a son I couldn't be prouder." He was laughing as he rode from the yard.

"Get going," Louise said. . . .

Willie understood it then—his biggest mistake. He hadn't really shared anything with her, assuming the whole burden himself without considering her a part of him. He crossed to her and put his arms around her. She smiled up at him; there was nothing about either of them that the other didn't understand now. Willie suddenly felt that they were solidified and made whole. It was a new feeling to him and perhaps to her—he had no way of knowing—but she was his woman and she pleased him as nothing else ever had. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

GAMBLER'S LUCK

By BILL GULICK

The old man said, "I figure you're the lookin' kind. . . ."

The next time he met up with Steve Burgess, Jeff knew, Steve would have blood on his hands, murder in his heart—and all the odds on his side!

JEFF KANE had come a long way across the desert country that night, pushing his horse hard so that he would reach the mountains while there was yet time to utilize the light of the dying moon. He crossed the icy stream, left his horse ground-tied in the deep shadow of the valley, and climbed upward afoot to the ledge which he remembered from so long ago.

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He inched his way carefully along the sheer face, circled a protruding rock, then, came to the entrance of the hidden box just as the last rays of the moon failed, canyon which he sought.

He paused there, taut as a fiddle string, and stared into the darkness ahead. At first he saw nothing, then his straining eyes caught a faint reddish glow. He let his breath out in a long sigh and drew the single-action Colt from its holster.

He had been right. When he lost the trail in the desert west of Cottonwood City two days ago, he'd made a guess that Steve Burgess would hole up here. Ten years might change the way a man lived, but the years didn't change a man's habits of thought. And Jeff knew the way Steve Burgess' mind worked, knew it as well as he knew this canyon.

Quietly Jeff moved toward the dull glow of the fire. He was very close before he saw the blanket wrapped figure of the sleeping man.

So Burgess considered himself safe here, he mused. Burgess must have forgotten that there was one person other than himself who knew the existence of this place.

A loose rock rolled under Jeff's foot. He froze as it made a small rattling sound. Till now, he had forgotten about the slide. He could not cross that jumble of loose rock without awakening Burgess, and he could not risk a fight in the dark.

He thrust the Colt back into its holster and sat down. Dawn would come in two hours. He could wait. He sat staring fixedly at the sleeping figure, and because there were memories here in this canyon his thoughts circled unwillingly back into the past, the strange patterns of his own life and that of Steve Burgess weaving themselves before his mind's eye.

Two men were once again in the canyon where they had lived together in their youth, ten years ago. Two men, one an officer of the law, the other a killer. He, Jeff Kane, wore the badge; the sleeping man yonder, Steve Burgess, had blood on his hands and murder on his soul.

Yet—and this was the thing that tormented Jeff Kane—but for the quirks of fate, the forks of an old trail, the fall of a tossed coin, he might be that sleeping figure and Steve Burgess the one sitting here waiting for the dawn.

But for the forks of an old trail, the fall of a tossed coin. . . .

THE early spring sun hung in the center of the sky when the two young men came out of the desert and reached the hilltop where the trail forked. They reined up.

"This is it," Steve said. "Here's where we split up."

Jeff nodded without looking at the man who had been his partner for nearly a year of gold-panning back there in the mountains. They were heartily sick of each other's company, sick the way men get when they share the same cabin, eat the same food, think the same thoughts for too long.

It might have been different, Jeff supposed, if they'd struck it rich. But they hadn't. They'd worked hard for a long year and now each of them had only a meager year's wages—slightly under a thousand dollars apiece.

Long ago, they had agreed to part company when they got back to civilization. The gold dust, the food, the equipment were already divided. All that remained now was deciding which trail each was to take.

The left-hand trail led northward to Cottonwood City and the prosperous ranching country which surrounded it.

The right-hand trail led southward into barren, less inviting country. Steve looked at Jeff and said shortly, "I suppose you're wanting to take the left-hand trail, too."

"I'd sort of figured on it," Jeff said.

"We agreed to split up here."

Jeff nodded wearily. The direction he rode didn't matter; just so he put distance

between himself and his ex-partner—quick.

Steve took a silver dollar from his pocket. "Shall we settle it the usual way?"

"Good enough," Jeff said.

"Heads I take the left-hand trail, tails you take it," Steve said, and tossed the coin into the air.

Jeff watched it spin over in a high, glittering arc. It landed on the ground and both men leaned down in their saddles to look at it.

"Heads," Steve said. "My luck's holding."

"Yeah," Jeff said, then he wheeled his horse about and set off at a jog-trot along the right hand trail, without so much as a backward glance at the man who had once been his friend. . . .

* * *

The man lying by the fire moved slightly and Jeff's hand went to the butt of his gun, remaining there until the sleeping form grew quiet once more. The hand relaxed slowly.

That's where it began, he thought, back there where the trail forked. He had learned, later, by the rangeland grapevine, what had happened after Steve Burgess went riding up-trail to Cottonwood City.

He'd done a thing natural enough for a young man eager for life and hungry for the pleasures of civilization after a long year in the wilderness. He'd got drunk that first night in Cottonwood City, gloriously, roaringly drunk. He'd bought liquor for everybody in the house, danced with the girls there in Blackie Dunnevan's Emporium, then wound up the wild night by losing all his remaining gold in a card game.

It was a thing any young fellow might do. Jeff himself might have done it if he had had the opportunity. But there were no roaring boom-towns along the southbound trail, no dancing girls, no high-stake card games. There was only the parched, barren range, the scattered trading posts, the occasional ranches stocked with scrubby cattle.

He'd felt bitter about his prospects in the country when he rode tired, dirty and hungry into the yard of the J-6 that evening, bitter at himself for being such a fool as to let the toss of a coin send him into this Godforsaken place. . . .

HE REINED up in the yard in front of the grimy frame house and called, "Howdy. Anybody home?"

A mongrel dog barked at him from the safety of the porch. After a moment, a thin, stooped, tired looking old man came out.

"Howdy, stranger. Get down and come in."

"Don't want to trouble you," Jeff said. "I need water and grain for my horse. Be glad to pay you for it."

"Get down, get down!" the man insisted "We ain't got much here at the J-6, but you're welcome to it. And no more of your insults about paying."

Jeff dismounted and introduced himself. The old man's name was Jennings and he informed Jeff that everybody called him Pop. He said he lived alone on the J-6 and worked it alone, which was evident enough to Jeff when he saw the run-down condition of the house and outbuildings.

Pop Jennings took care of the horse and then warmed up a pot of beans and a pan-ful of bacon for Jeff. After Jeff had eaten, the old man looked at him with shrewd, twinkling eyes and asked, "Are you ridin' or lookin'?"

"I'm not headed any place in particular, if that's what you mean," Jeff said.

"Then you're lookin'. There's only two kinds of people. One kind is always ridin' over the hill to a place where the grass is greener. They never find it. The other kind is lookin' for a place to settle down and it don't matter much to 'em where that place is. I figure you're the lookin' kind."

"How can you tell?"

"It's in a man's eyes, youngster. You can always see it in a man's eyes." Pop started clearing away the dishes. "Reckon you're tired. I got an extra bed and you're welcome to it. We can talk tomorrow."

Jeff had a good night's rest. He'd planned to move on the next day, but in the morning Pop said he was going out to mend a drift fence and asked Jeff to come along, and because he was hungry for talk Jeff went. Then something else came up to delay him the next day, and the day after that, till suddenly a week had gone by and he found himself not wanting to leave at all.

Pop offered him a job at forty a month and found, and Jeff took it as a matter of course. The weeks drifted by pleasantly and swiftly, and by spring round-up time he felt as though he had never known any other home but the J-6.

He noticed during the round-up that Pop was cutting out cattle for market that were too young to sell profitably and he protested against it. "You're selling off all your breeding stock, Pop. Keep those beeves another year or two and you'll make some real money. Sell them now and you'll barely break even."

Pop nodded wearily. "I know. But it ain't a question of what I want to do. The J-6 is mortgaged to the nub. I got a payment to meet and no way to raise the cash except selling some beef."

Jeff looked at him closely and said, "This payment—how much is it?"

"Fifteen hundred dollars."

"I've got a thousand of it."

Pop shook his head. "You're a fool to offer a loan to a washed-up cow outfit like mine."

Jeff stared out across the sunlit expanse of range. A recent rain had turned the dry, dust-gray grass a fresh green. Cattle grew fat on that kind of grazing land, he knew. If a man could hang on another season, if a man would buckle down and do some honest-to-God work here. . . .

Suddenly he felt a sense of power and strength. *He* could do it. If Pop would give him a chance, he could make something of this place.

"Who said this outfit was washed up?" he demanded belligerently. "Look. I'll loan you the thousand and we'll keep the cattle till they're prime. When we sell you pay the thousand back and we'll split the extra profit two ways. How does that sound?"

A Story of Hungry Guns

THE LONG RIDER

By GENE MARKEY

Shan figured he'd be able to hole-up at the ranch by the mountainside and then head west when the posse lost his trail. But he hadn't figured on a pretty girl reaching his heart—with something deadlier than bullets!

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Pop rubbed a tired hand across his chin and smiled. "That's what I like about you youngsters. Think you can whip anything. Okay, it's a deal."

That had been the beginning. Jeff had worked hard, harder than he had ever worked at anything. And the J-6 gradually came back to life. Pop said it was the new blood, the young blood, that accomplished the miracle.

Every now and then during those harsh years Jeff heard bits of news about Steve Burgess. He was still hanging around Cottonwood City. He worked first at this job, then at that, never staying long with one position.

A brief, bloody range war flared up between two of the big cow outfits near Cottonwood City and rumor had it that Burgess drew gunman's wages to ride for one of them for a while. There was an unsavory tale, too, concerning Burgess and a girl who danced in Blackie Dunnevan's Emporium, but Jeff discounted it because he knew how gossip spreaders loved to enlarge on such things.

His intense hate for Burgess lessened with distance and years. He began to see that what had happened during those long months in the mountains was only natural. The fault had been as much his own as his partner's. With his new perspective, he remembered again those qualities about Burgess that you couldn't help liking—the easy-going manner, the willingness to take hardship without complaint, the skill with horses.

You had to admire Steve's gambling heart, too. There was never an argument that he wasn't willing to settle by the mere toss of a coin. . . .

THE fire was completely dead now. Jeff Kane shifted his cramped limbs carefully, shivering with the night chill. Dawn was not far away. Already a faint tinge of gray lightened the eastern sky and within the hour the sleeping man would waken.

A pre-dawn silence held the mountains in a breathless hush, as if the vast wilderness were standing on tiptoe watching for the first glimpse of the sun. Sitting there in the silence, Jeff Kane felt that human life was a small, pitiful, tragic thing. Why was it that the breaks fell wrong for one man and right for the next? Why was it that he should have a comfortable home, a fine wife, two children that he loved, while Steve Burgess yonder had neither home nor peace nor a living soul to care for him?

Why had the luck been all on his side? Pop Jennings' dying and leaving him the ranch; Linda's coming into the community as a school teacher; meeting him, marrying him, his appointment as United States Marshal—all had been breaks that went his way.

But Steve Burgess had received only bad breaks. Certainly his falling in love with the dance hall girl hadn't been his fault. He had not been to blame for the fight with Blackie Dunnevan, if you could believe the tales you heard. And each bad break that had piled remorselessly one upon another to set him off on the road of crime—they could have come to any man.

They could have happened to himself, thought Jeff Kane. He shivered with something more than cold and for a moment wished that he had sent one of his deputies to do this job.

The darkness lessened gradually. Jeff took the Colt from its holster and checked it for the last time. Burgess had sworn he would not be taken alive.

Daylight came. The sleeping man stirred lazily, pushed the blanket aside and sat up. Jeff leveled his gun.

"Get up, Burgess," he said coldly. "You're under arrest."

Steve Burgess froze with complete surprise. Slowly he turned his head and looked at Jeff. His hair was matted and dirty. A week's stubble of brownish beard covered his face. His eyes were bloodshot.

But something of the old devil-take-it

light twinkled in them now and he smiled. "Hello, Jeff. How'd you know I was here?"

"I remembered the place, too. You should have thought of that."

"To tell the truth, I didn't think a United States Marshal would waste his time on me. I thought you'd send a deputy."

"This was one job I had to do myself," Jeff said.

"For old times' sake?"

Jeff shook his head. "Pack up your things, Steve. We're going back."

Burgess stood up. He'd slept with his gun and belt on but he kept his right hand carefully away from his side. The smile left his face and his eyes grew cold.

"You're wrong, Jeff. *I'm* not going back—alive. Might as well shoot me and get it over with."

Jeff looked at him steadily. He knew Burgess wasn't bluffing. He knew that it would be impossible for him to tie the outlaw and carry him along the narrow ledge which offered the only exit to the canyon—a man needed both hands free on that dangerous trail.

SLOWLY he holstered his gun. "If that's the way you want it, Steve. I'll give you an even break."

"I didn't think you were that much of a gambler."

Jeff shook his head and did not answer. To him, it wasn't a gamble; it was a sort of justice. In a way, it was an attempt to make up for the cruel tricks an erratic fate had played on the man before him, an attempt to give him one last make-or-break chance.

He waited patiently for the outlaw to make the first move. But Burgess kept looking at him, smiling. "Mind if I smoke?" he said.

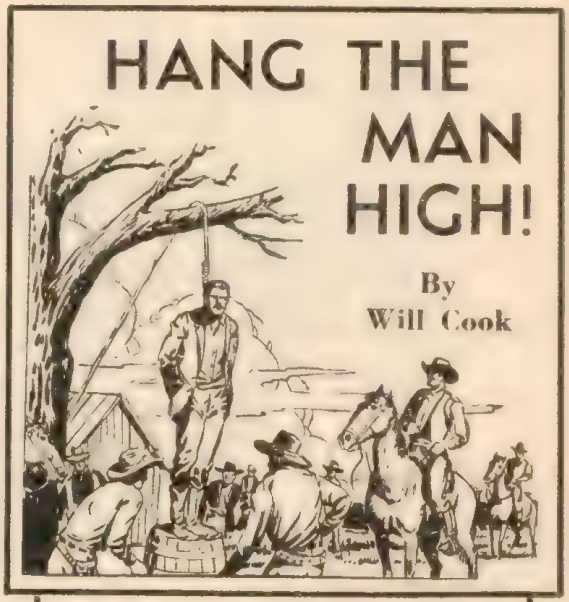
"Go ahead," Jeff said.

Burgess took the makings from a shirt pocket and slowly built a cigarette. Not until he had lit it and taken a deep pull did he speak. Then he said, "Jeff, you're a square hombre. You're too white to die."

"I don't figure on dying," Jeff said.

Burgess made an impatient gesture with his hand. "None of us do. But you got to admit that when lead starts flying somebody gets hurt. It might be you. Now, suppose we say each of us has got a fifty-fifty chance. If you kill me, then your job

(Continued on page 112)



Jim Buck had to walk the thin gunsmoke line between killing and murder without losing his heart to a dead man's vengeful daughter—or his head to the rustler bullets that reached for him!

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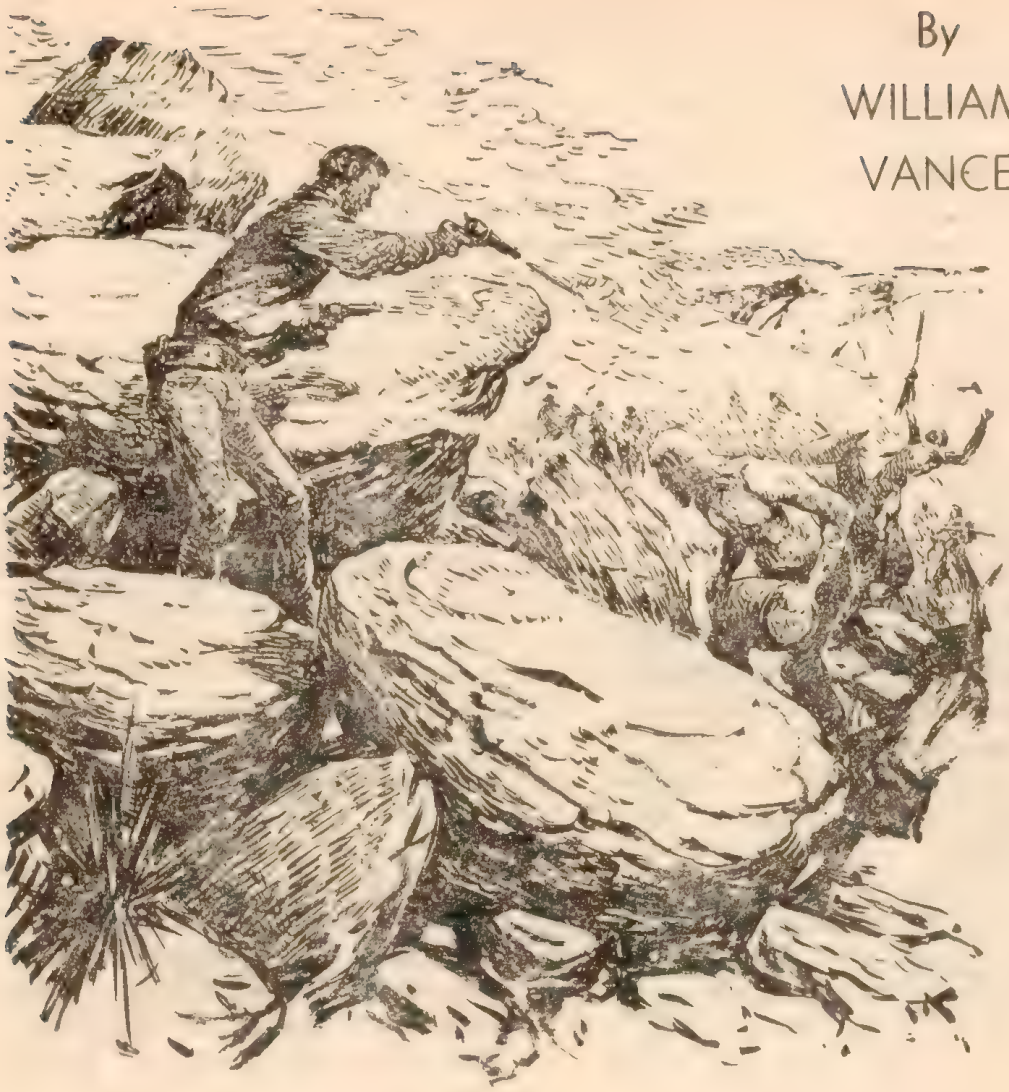
Esther said, "There are shells in the guns. And no more. . . ."

GUN THE MAN DOWN!

Only one man knew that Lieutenant Ramey was not really a friend of Apaches and renegades; only one man could prove that Ramey was not a deserter—and Ramey was wanted for that man's murder!



By
WILLIAM
VANCE

RAMEY excused himself and answered the knock. It was Corporal Bane, the colonel's orderly. Bane saluted and said, "The colonel wishes to see you, sir. Right away, sir."

Ramey felt the irritation come over him that always accompanied a meeting with Corporal Bane. He said, "All right, Corporal. And square that hat, soldier."

Bane saluted and said, "Yes, sir," in his soft voice and pushed his hat back from the tip of his nose.

"That's all." Ramey's voice was harsh. He turned and went across the room and regained his seat. "I don't know why it is. That man gets under my skin."

Lieutenant Van Horn laughed. "I know what you mean, Steve."

Peggy Van Horn looked up from the tiny garment she was sewing. "You men resent his education," she said.

Sylvia Bullock, the Colonel's daughter, got up from her seat and walked over to sit on the arm of Ramey's chair. She ruffled his straight black hair. "You've always been so mean to him," she said petulantly.

Ramey sighed. "I suppose. But there's something about an educated trooper that scares me. Maybe because I haven't much education myself."

Sylvia laid her fingers on his lips.

"Mustn't give away things like that," she said laughing, but beneath her laughter she meant it.

Van Horn laughed, too. "I don't know about that," he said. "But you'll have an explanation to make if you keep old—" he shot a quick glance at Sylvia and hastily amended it to "—if you keep the colonel waiting. You've been having a lot of conferences with him." He ended on an envious note.

Steve got to his feet. "You can take my part of it. You'll excuse me please." He called his good-nights from the doorway and went along the line of officer's houses to the colonel's quarters.

There was a light in the colonel's office. Ramey tapped lightly on the door and the colonel's voice said, "Come in, come in," with an impatience Ramey knew.

Ramey went in and saluted and the colonel shook his cigar toward the vacant chair by his desk.

Ramey sat down and immediately saw Corporal Bane cleaning boots in an adjoining room. He send, "Send Bane away."

"Bane's all right," grumbled the colonel, but he raised his voice and said, "Get a pitcher of water, Bane. And none of that warm stuff. Get it from the well."

"Yes, sir," Bane replied, and left the next room.

Colonel Bullock put his bright eyes on Ramey and said, "We've got another bunch of horses coming in day after tomorrow, Stephen."

Ramey moved uneasily in his chair. He said, "I think maybe this will do it."

"We've given them exactly two hundred and ninety-eight horses, Steve. This hundred coming in will make nearly four hundred. At that rate we'll break the government. And no closer to Boss."

"I think this'll work," Ramey murmured.

"It'd better," the colonel said with an underlying threat in his voice He softened, though, and added, "You know how it is. I'm laying myself wide open. Your neck is out, too. You'll take your detail and make a routine scout tomorrow morning, starting at daybreak. You know what to do from there. And for God's sake keep your men away from Dooley's Post."

"He'll slip up sometime," Ramey said. "He keeps the Apaches excited, stealing their women, robbing them blind and feeding them rotgut. He should be run out of the territory."

Bullock grunted. "Guesswork. Nothing on him."

"I never laid eyes on the man," Ramey said, "but Crick Jackson told me plenty. And Crick didn't lie."

"God rest his soul, he didn't," the colonel said heavily. He got to his feet. "The general's coming on an inspection trip, Steve. Let's get this thing finished off before he arrives."

Steve's lean face glowed with pleasure. It was a real surprise to learn his old commander, now a general, was headed for this area. "Glad to hear it, sir," he said, rising also. "I'll do my best, Colonel."

Bullock looked at him, nodding.

Corporal Bane said, "Your water, sir."

"Put it there," the colonel said. "Put it anywhere."

Bane gave Ramey a quick look, placed the pitcher of water on the Colonel's desk and walked out with military precision.

Ramey looked after him glumly. "Good night, sir," he said to the Colonel.

AT SUNDOWN the next day, Lieutenant Stephen Ramey camped his detail on the bank of a creek a half mile upstream from Dooley's Post. He put Sergeant Oglethorpe in charge and rode down the winding stream, until he could see the gleam of the post lights beyond a ridge; blinking yellow lights against the hazy gray-red of the sky. He sat there for a full five minutes, unmoving except for the impatient shifting of his tired horse.

Ramey relaxed suddenly. He smiled a

little in the darkness. He was smallish for the usual run of cavalry officers. He took off his hat and shook his head of it's straight black hair, feeling the wind cool on his damp scalp. His dark gray eyes searched the surrounding country but he saw nothing and expected to see nothing. He replaced his hat and felt his prominent, slightly-hooked nose, feeling the tenderness of it, brought on by the boiling desert sun, now behind a distant mountain.

He straightened in his saddle as he turned his ear into the little wind. He heard the sound again and he got down from his saddle and stood there, fighting his impatience.

"Yes, suh, Let'nunt," a mocking voice came to Ramey. "Right over yere, suh."

Ramey walked forward, leading his horse.

"Right theah," the voice said and Ramey stopped. He felt his temper burn in his belly and spread through him but he kept his mouth shut. "All right," the other said, "Where 'bouts now?"

"A hundred head," Ramey said between his teeth. "Best yet. They'll be at the holding corral at six tomorrow morning."

The mocking voice held a chuckle. "Ye' sure do your work well, Let'nunt."

Ramey pushed down a crazy desire to jump into the rocks where the man lay hidden. He kept reminding himself that it wasn't the time to do anything rash. Too much depended on doing the right thing. For one thing he'd began to gray over the temples and still was a lieutenant. The colonel had as much as promised him a captaincy if this thing went through the way it should. His voice was easier when he said, "When am I going to see Boss?"

"When Boss says so," the other came back. "So long, Let'nunt."

There was no sound but Ramey knew the other was gone. It was always like that. He climbed back on his horse and jogged back up the creek, watching the camp lights grow brighter.

The sentry challenged him and he grunted and rode on through to his own tent. Sergeant Oglethorpe took his horse and said, "I got a patrol out, cuttin' a circle 'round the camp. Just as you ordered, sir."

"Good," Ramey grunted. "We'll pull out at daylight, Sergeant."

Oglethorpe was a leathery-skinned man with the smell of horses always on him. He had grown old in western service and nothing ever surprised him. He had an intense dislike for all officers with one exception: Steve Ramey. He put his slitted eyes on Ramey's face and said, with concern in his voice, "Anythin' wrong, sir?"

Ramey knew it was a bid for information. He merely smiled and grunted again and went on into his tent. His supper was on the field desk and he ate sparingly, drank from his canteen, set the plate outside and lighted a cigar.

It was stifling hot inside, with the odors of dry canvas, leather and gun oil mingling to create a not unpleasant stink. He finished his cigar, removed his hat, shirt and boots and lay down on his cot. He reached out his hand and pinched out the candle.

He lay there in the hot darkness, thinking about the dry years behind him, wondering if there was anything that could change it. He could hear the low-pitched voices of his troopers down below and it gave him a lonely feeling.

Routine, he'd told Oglethorpe. Routine, just like the others. They were routine, all right, he thought grimly. He knew now that his thinking on the matter was all wrong, had been all wrong since the start. Tonight, the realization came to him that Boss was playing him for a fool. He heard it in the tone of the man he'd never seen, but whose voice was as familiar as Oglethorpe's drawl. Ramey tossed on his cot, wondering why it was that everything always come out this way for him. *Maybe, that's why I'm still a lieutenant.*

It was a bitter thought that grew more bitter when he speculated on Sylvia Bullock's attitude toward his long tenure as a junior officer. It was gall and wormwood. All the other juniors were much younger than he. Yet he'd given everything he had, always. He'd not been a brilliant, driving officer, but a steady plodding one. He'd never played Army politics. He'd never kissed any man's foot and he wasn't about to, he thought angrily.

His dissatisfaction wouldn't let him rest. He swung his feet out of his cot and lit his candle. He got a bottle and two tin cups from his pack and went to the opening and called, "Sergeant!"

Oglethorpe came quickly, as though he'd been near and waiting for a call. "Yes, sir," he said in his dry voice, standing before Ramey.

"Relax, Oglethorpe," Ramey said. "Come on in."

The tall sergeant ducked his head and came into the tent. He stood there, awkward and self-conscious while Ramey offered him a tin cup.

Ramey raised his cup and said, "Oblige me, Sergeant."

Oglethorpe smacked his lips and said, "Thankee, sir. Hits the spot."

Ramey laughed. "But what the hell is an officer drinking with an enlisted man for? Is that what you're thinking, Sergeant?"

Oglethorpe nodded without thinking and then said quickly, "Oh, no, sir, didn't pass my mind, sir."

"Don't bother to lie about it, Sergeant," Ramey advised dryly. "I drink with whom I like."

"That's what I likes about you, sir," exclaimed Oglethorpe. "I—"

"Just don't let it lull you into thinking I'm easy," Ramey said. "Good night."

Oglethrope's brows came together and he gave Ramey a sidelong look and turned away. "Good night, sir," he said, and he left the room quickly.

RIDING at the head of the column of twos, Ramey's dissastisfaction was still with him the next morning. He glanced back. "Close 'em up," he said sharply. "Close 'em up, dammit."

The twenty-four shapes lumped lifelessly in their saddles came closer together, riding through the early morning coolness with the ever-present dust rising to plague them. They strung out over a ridge and across a choppy area of low-lying buttes, outcroppings of flint-like colored rock, sand and stark outlines of saguaro cactus. Ramey's voice, impatient and cross, rose above the jingle of bit chains and the creak of leather. "Step 'em up," he said. "Step 'em up, dammit."

At eight o'clock they still held the pace. The sun bit into them with a malevolance as they crawled up on the tablelands with Korbin's Ranch buildings tiny as toys in the distance below them. Far ahead they could see the flag moving minutely in the near still air, above the fort. The horses grew eager.

They went through the gates with a rush and across the parade ground to the stables. Ramey left his horse with Oglethorpe and went back across the parade ground, his legs slowly regaining some of their feeling. The ground seemed unsteady beneath him, as it always did after a long patrol. The air inside the fort was still and it seemed an effort to breathe.

He made a half-turn when he saw a flash of white in the colonel's window. He went that way, feeling the fatigue drop away. She came out, looking cool and reserved, her eyes as blue as the skies, her yellow hair glinting in the molten sunlight.

"I'm happy you're back," she said and gave him her hand. He glanced around and bent, his lips brushing her cheek before she drew quickly back, her eyes darkening. "It's daylight, Stephen. And those whiskers!"

He squeezed her hand and grinned. "No razors. I cut it short thinking of you."

She looked at him speculatively. "I think you would, Stephen."

"Does that please you?" he asked eagerly. He wrinkled his nose, smelling the sweetness of the odor that always seemed to cling to her.

She shook her head first one way and then the other. "I don't know," she said.

Ramey whirled at the sound. He caught the glance Corporal Bane laid on Sylvia before the trooper's eyes shifted to his own and the troopers soft and cultivated voice spoke, "The Colonel wishes to see you, sir. At once, sir."

Ramey scowled. It was all proper as could be but there was something about this man that didn't let him rest. It was as though Bane was saying, "Look at me. I'm no ordinary horse soldier. I'm a gentleman."

"Yes, Corporal," Ramey said and he couldn't resist adding, "Straighten your hat, soldier."

Corporal Bane's face was smooth and placid as he pushed his hat back from his nose. He saluted smartly and turned with military precision. His shoulders were wide and his hips lean. Ramey scowled again.

"You're hard on him," Sylvia said.

He glanced at her swiftly and saw her eyes on Bane's retreating figure. He felt a surge of jealousy that was almost sickening. "Maybe," he said. "Will I see you tonight?"

Her eyes were lazy. "Maybe you'd better see what fa—what the colonel has in store for you."

"Or what I've in store for the colonel," he said, thinking suddenly of the thing that'd occupied his mind since last night.

"Maybe," she said enigmatically, "maybe that's why you're still a—" She stopped suddenly, looked at him wide-eyed and then looked away.

He said, "Yes, I suppose," and turned, conscious he lacked Corporal Bane's military bearing.

"Steve," she called. When he stopped she said, "Don't be angry with me Stephen."

He grinned at her. "I couldn't if I wanted to," he said. He tramped on toward the Colonel's office.

COLONEL BENJAMIN BULLOCK was a bright-eyed man of fifty-five with the slow, quiet smile of authority. His mouth was thinned out by discipline and he had violent likes and dislikes. He waved his cigar toward a chair and Ramey sat down with a sigh and relaxed all over the chair.

Colonel Bullock sat there for a full minute with his eyes on Ramey. Then he said, "Another hundred head. What'd it get us?"

Ramey opened his eyes. "Nothing. It won't work. I knew it last night. Boss has been playing me for all he can." His voice ended on a bitter note.

There was a heavy silence in the room, broken only by the impatient tap of the colonel's fingers against his arm rest. "Well?" the Colonel's voice sharpened. "What now?"

"I've gone over it in my mind," Ramey said slowly, trying to make it plain this was no impulsive gesture. "It hasn't worked out as we planned. And only because Boss is damned clever. I've another plan. I think it'll work."

The Colonel's displeasure was on his face and more so in his voice "Is it going to entail the expenditure of another two or three hundred horses?"

Ramey flushed. "I asked for that, I suppose. No, sir. Here's what I want to do, with your permission of course. I want to be placed under arrest. For anything that might seem reasonable. Conduct unbecoming to an officer can cover a multitude of sins."

Colonel Bullock opened his eyes wide, reminding Ramey momentarily of Sylvia. "What the devil are you driving at?"

"I'll break out," Ramey said. "You can send a detail out to search for me to make it look good. Boss'll look me up when he hears abut it."

"And make short work of you," Bullock said, shaking his head. He raised his voice. "I won't do it, Steve."

"Did you call, sir?" a soft voice said from the doorway. It was Corporal Bane, standing at attention inside the door.

Ramey felt irritation surge over him. He had a feeling Bane had been out there listening. He had a smugly satisfied expression on his handsome face. Ramey straightened in his chair, angry with himself that Bane should cause him to do so.

The colonel waved his cigar. "No, Bane, no."

Bane vanished.

Ramey said, "It'll work, sir. We'll keep this between you and I. When Boss and his gang are out of business, we can explain—to those who need it."

"Seems a hell of a way to break up a gang of horse thieves," the Colonel observed. His eyes narrowed. "Maybe it will work. Nothing else has."

"This Boss is clever. Clever as the devil himself. He doesn't leave a clean trail."

Bullock stood up. "All right," he said. "We'll give it a try, Steve." He put out his hand. "Good luck to you, boy."

Steve said, "I think I'll need it. Send the provost within an hour, if you please, sir. Give me a chance to shave and say hello to—" he stopped, recalling the look on Bane's face as the corporal had stared at Sylvia. A bold stare, it seemed to him as he remembered.

Bullock smiled. "Yes, Steve." He waved his cigar, dismissing Ramey.

After Ramey had bathed and shaved he changed his mind about Sylvia. He wanted to see her, to be near her for a little while. His want was a gnawing ache inside of him but he resisted the urge that pulled him toward the big dwelling at the head of officer's row. She had a way of getting information from him and he stayed away for that reason.

He was standing in the middle of his small room when Captain Purdy strode in, followed by the Corporal of the Guard and two troopers. Purdy was an olive-skinned man with a sweeping black mustache and a supreme belief in the might of the cavalry arm of the United States Army. He said brusquely, "My orders are to place you under arrest, Lieutenant."

Ramey took a step backward and allowed his jaw to drop. He looked around the room as though looking for a way to escape and then let his shoulders fall. "I should have known," he murmured and let his chin rest on his chest. He didn't miss the satisfaction on Purdy's face. He raised his head. "What's the charge?"

"Insubordination. Conduct unbecoming to an officer and gentleman."

"Is that all?" Ramey asked sarcastically.

"The colonel said there might be others," Purdy said. He wheeled and said, "You men wait outside."

The corporal and troopers went out the door. When they were clear of the building, Purdy turned and his brown face was troubled. He said, "I'm sorry as hell, Steve. I don't know what it's all about. But I've known you and I'd swear this couldn't happen."

"Let's leave off the preaching," Ramey observed.

Purdy flushed. "It sounds that way. But what I mean, if there's anything I can do—"

"Just recall your men," Ramey said coldly. "And get this over with."

Purdy's face froze. He said stiffly, "As you wish, Lieutenant."

Young Lieutenant Phillip Crady stood stiffly outside Ramey's door. There was a look of frank disapproval on his youthful face. He was fresh from the Academy and he heartily disapproved of Ramey. Now he gave Ramey a look that plainly showed

he thought Ramey had disgraced the uniform he wore.

Ramey said, "It wasn't this way at the Academy, eh, Crady?"

Ramey's room had been hot enough. The guardhouse, bounded on one side by the stables and the other by the enlisted men's kitchen was more so. While Ramey stood there by the window, man after man strolled by, their eyes avidly looking in. The word was going around, he thought with grim amusement. The most unpopular officer at Fort Duval had finally got his just deserts, he supposed they were saying.

Van Horn stopped outside and looked all around before he came over to the window. His face was angry.

"Did Peg make you come?" Ramey asked.

Van's face changed. He scowled. "You know better than that. What's the old man thinking about? He must be crazy. Listen, Steve, I'm getting a petition up. Everyone's going to sign it—"

"Don't do anything so damned foolish," Ramey snarled. "What's one mustang, more or less? What's the matter with you, Van?"

Van Horn looked at him. "Why, dammit, if he'll do this to you—one of the best officers he's got—none of us are safe."

"Grow up," Ramey sighed. "Just forget it, Van. Forget it."

"Peg says tell you we're sticking with you," he muttered and went on.

Oglethorpe who must have waited out Van Horn, hurried up. He stood outside the window, his homely face twisted in perplexity. "If there's anythin' I can do, sir," he said, "I'll sure do it."

"Nothing, Sergeant," Ramey said. "Thanks for remembering me."

Oglethorpe said, "You're sure there ain't somethin' I can get for you?"

"Hell, no," Ramey laughed. "Unless you've a file on you." He watched the shocked expression appear on Oglethorpe's face and reminded himself that when this was over he'd remember Oglethorpe.

RAMEY was still standing by the small window when the trumpeters on the parade ground began a few halting testing notes. He put both hands on the bars when the trumpets began to roll taps at him from across the wide expanse of field. He couldn't stop the chill that ran down his back.

He thought about it all then, back to the days when it all began and his hopes that he'd go a long way with this service he loved. He'd dreamed that some day he'd wear a general's stars and run campaigns that would become studies for officer students. He shook his head sadly. These dreams were gone to be replaced by stark reality, where he was risking his life and service to stamp out horse thieves preying on Army stock. The last trumpet note died away, like a song of wild geese in flight, fading into the distance. Lights winked out around the compound. The guard relief clumped by his window and he wondered which of the men it was. He stood there, trying to put down the old lonely feelings, losing himself in planning the action to come.

At two o'clock, when the guard changed again, Ramey went to the outside door and said, "Please call the Corporal of the Guard. There's a rattlesnake in here and I need a light."

A youthful trooper came close to the door and said, "I'll get a light, Lieutenant. The corporal's checking the stables." He returned in a moment with a lantern. He had a smile on his face as he unlocked the door and came in. "Where is it, sir?"

Ramey put down his compunctions as he swung. He glimpsed surprise on the boy's face. The upflung arm rose too slowly. The young trooper fell where he stood and Ramey bent over and got his belt with one quick snatch at the buckle. He hooked it around his own waist as he ran through

the door. He heard a voice calling across the compound: "Corporal of the Guard! Corporal of the Guard!"

Ramey cursed as he reversed his steps and went toward the gate. Down near the Colonel's quarters the sound of voices split the night and a gun went off. Ramey sprinted. He ran up the ladder beside the gate to the catwalk and a dark shape loomed up in front of him.

"What's going on—" The question turned into a grunt as Ramey used his pistol like a club. He caught the man and lowered him to the catwalk. He leaped up on the wall as a shout came plainly across the heat-filled night. "Prisoner's escaped!"

The brass tone of Sergeant Eastis split the night as he bawled, "Stand by the stable!"

Ramey squatted and leaped into the darkness. He landed in soft sand and went sprawling. He got to his feet and ran across the stretch of open ground between the wooden wall of the fort and the creek. He jumped the creek and landed on a crumpling bank. He felt the coolish water's rush into his boots and then he climbed out and went on, stumbling over rocks and clumps of sage in the darkness. He stopped when he heard the sound of barking dogs ahead at Mezo's camp. The friendly Apache would have a few head of horses grazing somewhere near, Ramey knew.

He heard the urgent sound of a trumpet calling from the fort and he smiled grimly. They'd be out here soon, beating the brush for him. Or they might try to get to Mezo's camp first, knowing that was his only chance for a mount. He went ahead then, seeing the outline of a shaggy Indian pony on the outskirts of the camp. Then he saw another and another. They were on pickets. He ran, disregarding the barking dogs and plunging ponies. He kicked a picket pen over with his boot and took up the rawhide line and went down it hand over hand, his feet braced against the violent tug of the frightened, nervous pony.

He threw off the picket line and got on the snorting animal and clamped his legs down tight. He held the flying mane with one hand and the rawhide hackamore with the other, leaning over the pony's neck. Lights blazed from the tower at the south gate of the fort and he glimpsed an armed detail pouring out into the night. He laughed as he put spurs to the pony and made a wide circle. The detail was heading straight for Mezo's camp.

CHAPTER TWO

Apache Attack!

A HALF hour later, Ramey pulled the panting pony up in the shadow of the wooden wall. He urged the animal in close and stretched to hook his fingers over the top. He kicked out and the pony scampered off into the darkness. Ramey pulled himself up and dropped down to the sutler's roof. He crept down the slanting roof and looked around inside. It was clear and he dropped to the ground. He checked for the Corporal of the Guard before he went into the stable. The corporal was with a group of men down near the main gate.

He got his own horse and led the animal out, carrying his saddle under his arm. He saddled the horse in the shadows of the blacksmith shop. He led the animal behind the row of married officer's quarters and stopped on the only patch of grass inside the compound, behind Colonel Bullock's quarters.

He opened the rear door and went through the house with a light tread. A light was burning in the parlor and the sound of sobbing came to his ears. He stopped, a sudden chill striking his heart. He stood there for a moment and then he went on into the room.

Sylvia came to her feet when he stood before her. Her face was white and tear-stained. She stared at him with horror in

her eyes and then she screamed: "You murderer! You murderer!"

His mouth opened. "I don't understand," he said dumbly.

She opened her mouth to scream and then closed it. She looked past him and Ramey whirled. Corporal Bane stood there with a gun in his hand. There was a satisfied smile on his face as he cocked the gun.

"Unbuckle your belt, sir," Bane said in his soft, musical voice. "Let it drop on the floor, sir." There was an immense satisfaction in his voice.

"What's this all about?" Ramey demanded, letting his belt fall to the floor at his feet.

"Why, sir," Bane said, "just as Miss Sylvia said—murder. Since you killed the colonel trying to escape. Very clever, sir, hiding out inside the fort and making everyone believe you'd gone over the wall."

Ramey's hand went out and slammed into the lamp. He dove into Bane as the gun went off. He swung his fist into Bane's face, feeling the man's teeth go into his knuckles. He felt no pain, only savage satisfaction. He struck again and again and Bane was down. He groped and found Bane's gun. He was up then and running. He crashed into a chair and went to the floor. He scrambled to his feet again and plunged out the door. He could hear Sylvia screaming in a high-pitched voice that tore into his consciousness. He caught up his reins and vaulted into the saddle. His horse jumped and began running.

"Throw open the gate," he yelled as he thundered ahead, spurring his horse into a longer run. The gate swung open and he caught a glimpse of staring faces with open mouths as he went by. A shout welled up and a carbine boomed. The desert fled by beneath him and the hot wind was in his face. He pulled the pounding animal down to an easy gallop and then a canter.

He swore bitterly as the full force of his predicament shocked him. The colonel was the only man with knowledge of their plans to trap Boss. The colonel was dead. Ramey put a finger inside his collar and tore it loose. He had a feeling the hangman's noose was tightening around his neck.

NEAR daylight Ramey left his horse in one of the lonesome canyons that split the Perdido Mountains. It was an unknown spot to anyone but himself and the Apaches. It held a little grass and a trickle of water and he knew his horse wouldn't stray from the feed and drink. He climbed on foot to an abandoned cliff dwelling high above. Crick Jackson the civilian scout had shown these old cliff houses to Ramey and now Crick had been dead these last two years. Shunned by the superstitious Apaches, Ramey had a feeling he'd be safe here for a time.

A portion of the adobe and rock wall had crumpled and he climbed over it, listening for the warning rattle of nesting snakes. He got a handful of gravel and dried clay and tossed it into the darkness. He heard the rocks strike the rocky floor and bounce into silence. There was no answering sound. Satisfied, he jumped down into the room and walked across to the rock wall. He sat with his back against the wall and he could look through the ruined partition and see the brightening sky and the hard brilliant light of a late star in the grayish sky. Below the star was the ragged outlines of the mountains. He relaxed, wondering why it was everything he tried went wrong. Was it because he was inept and didn't know? He'd always got high marks in those things that called for plodding patience. Or was it because he was simply born under one of the unlucky stars and everything he touched turned to dust, just as other men conversely had the magic touch? There was a deep bitterness in him as he sat there in the semi-darkness of the home of a long-disappeared race, thinking that even in those days there'd been men whose lives

were threaded with ill-luck, fighting against the fates, struggling for recognition, survival, promotion, or whatever it was the times offered.

When he awoke the heat had begun to penetrate into the cliffs. He felt sweat standing on his face and on his body and he stood up, feeling the cramp in his legs and shoulders. He stretched, looking down into the barren welter of rocks, sand and spiny growth. His belly griped hungrily and growled a protest. His stretch froze as a horseman rode into view far down the canyon. Another followed and another and another until a small detail was in view. He put his two hands on the wall and leaned forward, watching. He swore softly as the detail labored up the canyon. He saw that one of the riders rode bareback and wore a gaudy headband. They were looking for him in earnest now, he thought with a tiny feather of fear tickling his spine. They had an Indian tracker showing them the way. They were on his trail and getting damned hot. It would be a matter of forty-five minutes before they'd reach the canyon where he'd left his horse. If he showed himself they'd know they were close, because once he left the shelter of the cliff dwellings there was no cover. If he kept to his shelter, there was a chance they'd go on. Unless his horse craved company and came out of the canyon when it got a smell of other horses. Ramey knew his horse liked the company of other horses.

He decided to remain where he was. He sat there watching them close the distance and the way the Indian tracker's head swung from side to side, Ramey knew he was having trouble. He felt a mild elation as the detail crawled past the near-hidden mouth of the canyon in the rocks and to a casual passerby, it would appear that canyon was as sterile as the country around. They'd never suspect him of hiding in a dry canyon.

His elation, teetering on hope, faded when he saw his horse prance out of the canyon. The detail was already past and he held his breath, hoping they wouldn't look back. He cursed when he saw his horse toss it's head. He knew it was whistling though he couldn't hear at this distance. He knew it was whistling by the way it's head went up and down and it's neck stretched. The detail halted, turning. He saw them swing and scatter, drawing their carbines.

The Indian rode back alone and as he neared Ramey's horse, that animal turned and broke for the canyon. The Indian expertly rode it into the canyon wall and returned, leading the horse. There was a short consultation then, and their gestures and glances were directed to the cliff dwelling where Ramey stood sweating.

He knew they would be along soon. He took out Bane's gun and looked at it. It held six shells of which two had been fired. He had no shells other than those in the gun.

Ramey sucked in his breath suddenly and his forehead furrowed. He was trying to remember and suddenly he knew. Bane had fired only one shot at him, he knew. Yet there were two empties in the gun. He remembered the gun going off near the Colonel's quarters just about the time he'd broken out of the guardhouse. He wondered if it was possible Bane had killed the Colonel. And if so, why? There was a lot of things he'd have liked to think about but this wasn't the time. The detail had scattered and was climbing toward the cliff house, deployed for action. He knew they would come in and get him. They were trained to do it. He had helped in that training himself. He shivered in the heat, just thinking about it.

There were fifteen of them, not counting the Indian tracker who wouldn't fire a shot unless he was cornered. Ramey had four shells. If he had fourteen and made each of them count, one of them would get him. He felt a sort of morbid pride

in being responsible for that, in part at least.

He thought, *it's going to be hard to shoot at them. It's going to be* damned hard to shoot at them. A man you've lived with and fought beside and with whom you've brushed death. The nearer they got the harder it seemed.

With his nerves tense, his gut muscles tight as a fiddle string, the first shot sounded, loosening him. Then he frowned. He hadn't heard the whine of the piece of lead. Another gun went off and then another. He heard a high-pitched yipping and yapping that made his gut muscles tighten again. He knew that sound. He'd heard it a dozen times in his three years on the desert. And each time it'd meant death and destruction. Fury unleashed.

The first Apaches streamed off the point of a shoulder and flowed down and around the detail. Ramey saw them in action on the gallop for the first time. He'd heard about it and never believed it. They had good horses and they knew how to get the most out of them. The brown clinging shapes seemed to be part of the horse. The horses appeared to know what it was all about. This was learning something, he thought. When the soldiers were mounted, the Indians would dismount. When the soldiers were afoot the Indians struck from astride their wiry ponies. He felt a bitter taste in his mouth at this small knowledge he would never use as a soldier.

It was over in fifteen minutes. There was a half a hundred Apaches and sixteen soldiers, including the Indian tracker who was writhing on a spear that pinned him between two rocks. An Apache here and there was hacking away methodically with a hatchet and a club. Sickened, Ramey had to watch. He couldn't take his eyes away from them for a moment. He was sick with shame that he hadn't gone out and given his four bullets and his life.

They went away, leaving the stench of death behind. Ramey came out of the cliff house and went down the mountain to the scatter of men, brown and white. He hurried because he knew the Apaches would return soon and pick up their dead.

LIEUTENANT PHILLIP CRADY lay within a circle formed by six Apaches. He had an arrow in his throat and if his teeth hadn't been showing in a horrible grin, he'd have seemed as young and handsome as when Ramey had last seen him. Ramey thought of the pride and arrogance of Crady that was the pride and arrogance of the very young and he felt his eyes water and he cursed and went on. He went from man to man. He knew them all by sight if not by name. They had given a good account of themselves. They had no bullets left in their pouches.

Ramey swore. He went on down the sharp ravine, past the canyon where he'd left his horse. His boots pinched his hot feet and they seemed suddenly worse when he remembered the distance he'd have to travel to get another horse and shells for his gun. He had to have food, too. Food and water. Right now, water was the most important. He could feel dehydration setting in as he walked through the blistering heat.

Two hours later he wondered how he could have been so comfortable such a short time before. The dancing horizon was a blur through his sweat-drenched bruning eyes. The immense expanse of the sky was blue and free of clouds. The yellow ball of sun seemed to explode before his eyes. He used his soaking wet sleeve to mop his forehead and he stopped in the sparse shade of a saguaro. The billowing land spread out from him in all directions, a desolate wasteland filled with silent unnameable savagery.

A thin streamer of smoke hung in the air far off to his right. He searched his mind, trying to see the land as it would appear from some higher point. His slitted eyes swung right and left, laying it out in

his mind. He remembered then, a prospector's cabin in the remote reaches of the lower Perdido. Perdido. Lost. Well-named, he thought. He headed for the cabin at a shambling walk. At least, he believed the cabin was in that direction

It was the right way. He had sense enough to get down as he neared the cabin. The thin streamer of smoke still hung in the motionless air when he shoved his head over a ridge, his hands gripping a red boulder that was hot to his touch. He didn't notice his burning hands.

The cabin was a square of black and the thin streamer of smoke came from what once was a shuck mattress. All else was gone.

The Apaches were gone too, Ramey decided, after he'd stayed there on the ridge for five minutes, watching the area around the spring with hungry eyes. He made his way to the cabin. He went through the smoking ashes to reach the spring that bubbled beyond, in a cluster of moss-covered rock and brush. He threw himself down into the mud and plunged his burning face into the cool water. He pushed his head down until his nose touched the sandy bottom and he felt the cooling liquid rush into his ears and up over his neck. He used his hand to push more of it up into his lank black hair. He raised up and let the water run down his neck and onto his back and chest. He felt the breeze catch it and cool it on his skin. He drank then, a dozen slow sips that trickled down his raw and burning throat.

It was then he heard the strange inhuman noise. He got to his feet, alert, Bane's gun in his hand at full cock, the hairs on his neck quivery. He went ahead on legs that were stiff, forcing himself to walk forward. He'd seen this once before and now that he saw it again, he felt the vivid rush of old forgotten sensations coming alive.

The old man was still living. He was staked out, stark naked, his body a blood red where his skin had been protected by his clothing. The ants were busy and Ramey swore and beat his hands against his breeches time and time again as he tried to untie the rawhide throngs that had disappeared into the aged skin. He got the old man free and dragged him to the spring. He scooped water out in his two hands and let it drop between the white-bearded lips. The old man made a futile motion toward the spring and fell back and lay motionless. His eyes were agonizingly alive and his bloody lips moved.

Shocked, Ramey stood back, sweat starting anew on his forehead. The old man's tongue had been severed.

Ramey leaned close, trying to put the grotesque sounds together. He looked at the old man and shook his head. "I don't understand," he said.

Hopelessness clouded the old eyes. His hands went out to Ramey and he pointed toward the ashes of the cabin. Ramey tried to follow the pointing finger but he could see nothing. The clawlike hands grabbed at him as the old man tried to get to his feet.

Ramey lifted him then and started toward where the cabin had stood. The old man nodded once and closed his eyes. His head dropped on Ramey's shoulder.

Standing in the ashes of the cabin, the old man pointed and Ramey saw it this time. Blackened stones that had been used for cooking purposes. Ramey knelt and the old prospector's hand clawed at one of the stones, upended it. There was a cavity beneath where the stone had been.

Ramey was helpless at the sudden ferocity of the old man. He stood back and watched as the dying man painfully groped in the cavity there in the ashes of his cabin. He drew out a buckskin sack, a watch that gleamed golden in the sun and a piece of soiled paper. He picked up a piece of charred wood and his trembling fingers put it to the piece of soiled paper. Watching his faltering hands, Ramey read: *Get*

gold show on map. Girl pichur datter my name Sam Cutler. Half gold yourn half datter Est—His hand stiffened and the man who wrote his name Sam Cutler died.

THE buckskin sack held a small bottle that had at one time contained Doctor Isaiah Black's Elixir according to the almost illegible label. The bottle was extraordinarily heavy, containing something that looked like small blackish pebbles. Ramey uncorked the bottle and let the pebbles roll out into his hand. They felt unbelievably heavy as they rolled around in his sweaty palm. He began to tremble. It was gold. Pure gold. Nuggets the size of a small bore bullet. He had difficulty putting the nuggets back into the bottle.

He examined the paper next. It was a crude drawing. He recognized the wavering line that was apparently Perdido Creek, near Apache Peak. The contours of the Perdido was familiar to Ramey, as was Apache Peak, the focal point of the map. There was a notation at the bottom of the map that simply said: *Key H. ten paces thru. Right ten paces. I'm six foot tall.*

Ramey knew the country represented on the map. He'd been over it, on patrol, on scout detail and reconnaisance missions. He'd been over it with Crick Jackson the civlian scout and with Mezo the friendly Apache and with his own men. The word: *Key H.* meant nothing to him. Ten paces through and ten paces right was simple enough. The laconic notation, *I'm six foot tall,* meant simply that the paces were those of a six-foot man. Ramey felt a tremor of eagerness run over him. He put it down, that eagerness, trying to keep his mind in a different channel. He was an officer. He was on special detached duty, with a specific mission. A job he wanted to do.

Get hold of yourself Ramey, he admonished himself. *You were an officer. You were on a mission. Now you're wanted for murder. For the murder of your commanding officer. What'll the general think of that when he drops in on his inspection tour? What'll the general think of his protege? How'll that hit the old man who brought you up out of the ranks? The one man who believed in you.*

What about your ideals, Ramey? Where are they now? Are they dead now that you've seen those nuggets that could be mistaken for small rocks except for their incredible weight?

He cursed and snapped open the cover on the watch. The girl's picture looked at him from amused eyes. Wide eyes, wide-spaced, big with a child-like quality about them that was somehow appealing and he unconsciously tagged it as innocence. A generous mouth, with a touch of a smile on it. The same smile that was in her eyes. She was a girl who smiled with everything she had. A nice wide brow, a wave of hair that he knew as a cowlick. High cheek bones made her face slightly pointed. He felt a stir of interest and then he impatiently snapped the watch shut.

He'd never be able to find her. Not in a hundred years. He knew only that her last name was Cutler. Est—it might be Esther or Estelle, or—or—he couldn't think of any other name. He knew nothing about her. Not where she lived, nor where she'd ever lived in her entire life.

He searched the cavity but it yielded nothing further. He put the slip of paper in his leather-covered note book. He wrapped the bottle securely in the buckskin pouch and shoved it inside his shirt. He carried Sam Cutler's body to the nearby rocks and stacked rocks around it and made a sort of cairn. He brought a fire-blackened stone from the cabin ashes and scratched the name CUTLER in the soot. He looked about him to see if there was anything he'd missed. He went back to the spring and drank again.

He went down the canyon. There was a decision to be made and he was torn between his training and his share of human greed.

BEFORE night fell and Dooley's Post was there in front of him, Ramey had hidden from two mounted patrols. He didn't know whether they were searching for him or scouting for the main body of Apaches. He knew it could be either way and the knowledge was a ball of bitterness inside of him. To be hunted as he'd hunted Indians. Too. he had sudden remembrances through the day of Sylvia Bullock's white, tear-stained face, her terrified eyes and he could hear again her screams.

He put all this out of the way as he walked along the wooden wall of Dooley's Post. There was a smell of cooking meat in the air and it started the saliva in his jaws. He came at last to the big double door of the post and it was closed. He pounded on the door with his gun butt and raised his voice.

"Who's out thar?" a voice called.

"White man," Ramey answered in a cracked voice. His tongue was swollen. He'd had no water since leaving Cutler's spring.

There were sounds inside and one of the doors creaked open. Ramey walked into the circle of light and the door slammed shut and the bar went home with a clatter. Ramey squeezed his eyes shut and opened them. Two men stared at him. Back beyond in the darkness, Ramey heard a man's querulous tone calling to the gate guard.

"Hit's a horse soldier, Dooley," one of the men said, "without his hoss." He gave Ramey a little push in the direction of the calling voice. "He air in bad shape, too." He followed Ramey and guided him through a door and into a room that stank of unwashed bodies.

"Light that candle, Hank," the voice commanded.

From a shower of sparks a flickering yellow light came to life. The guard's shadow was big on the wall as he stalked to the door, saying, "He come afoot, Dooley."

"Ye' said it once," Dooley growled, sitting up on the woven mat that lay on the packed earth floor. He leaned over and gave the squaw beside him a resounding slap. "Git," he said.

The girl jumped to her feet. She gave Ramey a timid look and fled through the doorway. Dooley lifted the bottle beside the mat and put it to his lips and tilted it. A gurgling sound filled the air. He offered the bottle to Ramey.

Ramey said through his cracked and bleeding lips, "I need some water."

Dooley surveyed him critically with his beady black eyes. He was a big man, six feet or more, with folds of fat around his middle. He was completely bald but his face was covered with a heavy black beard through which gray showed like patches of snow on a lava bed. "Ye look it," Dooley said. "Git that air water bag hangin' outside the door."

Ramey found it by the coolness it gave off. The canvas bag was moist and felt good to his touch. He tipped it and let the water spill into his mouth, over his face and neck. He drank sparingly and went back inside to find Dooley packing his pipe, sitting cross-legged on the mat.

Ramey had heard of Dooley from Crick Jackson and all of it had been bad. Looking at him now, Ramey believed all he'd been told. "That Apache girl is bad medicine, Dooley," Ramey said bluntly. He knew there was only one way of getting an Apache woman.

Dooley showed his yellow teeth and said, "Hand me that air candle, Lieutenant."

"Get it yourself," Ramey said.

Dooley continued to grin. "For a man who's wanted bad as you, you're mighty snappish," he complained. "What d' you want o' me, Ramey?"

The word got around fast, Ramey thought. But then Dooley made it his business to know of what went on around him. Ramey knew that from what Crick Jackson had told him. Crick had hinted that Dooley might be tied up with Boss's gang.

"A horse," Ramey said. "A good horse. Shells and clothes. Some food and a canteen. Camp gear. That's all."

"That's aplenty," Dooley said. The grin moved off his face. "You'll ketch more flies with sugar than vinegar, Lieutenant."

"I've got gold to pay for what I need," Ramey said bleakly. "I'm not begging."

"That's a hoss of a different color," Dooley said and he got to his feet. "You gonna stay here tonight?"

Ramey shook his head. "Your place stinks, Dooley. And I might not wake up. Get me what I want and I'll be on my way."

"Kentry's crawlin' with 'Paches," Dooley grinned.

"I know about that," Ramey said.

Dooley lifted the candle from the table and said, "Come along, Ramey."

After Ramey had got what he needed from Dooley's stock, he decided to add a rifle to his purchases. Dooley had a new Winchester, one of the short-barreled saddle guns. He took that along with six boxes of ammunition.

Dooley's little black eyes took on a greedy shine when Ramey asked him if he had a gold scale. The trader set the scale on the counter and Ramey shook out the golden nuggets. Dooley picked one from the scale and examined it closely, his black eyes darting now and again to Ramey.

"Where'd you git it?" he asked, with the gleam still in his eye.

Ramey laughed shortly. "In the mountains," he said.

Dooley licked his lips. "Any more whar that come from?"

"Where's that horse?"

Dooley came around to stand beside him. "We can make a bargain, Ramey. You're not gonna bé havin' any time to git any more o' that stuff. You tell me whar it is. I'll send you a share whar you light after you quit runnin'."

"Get me a horse," Ramey said.

Dooley looked at him with that strange greedy shine to his eyes and turned wordlessly and left the stockroom.

While he waited for Dooley, Ramey made his pack. That finished, he stripped his uniform off there in the stockroom and put on stiff new waist overalls and a linsey shirt. The civilian clothes felt strange to him because it'd been so long since he'd worn anything but a uniform. He shoved Bane's gun inside his waistband, wondering momentarily about the two fired shells in the corporal's gun.

Dooley came into the room and stood there staring at Ramey.

"I got pants and shirt," Ramey said. "How much more?"

Dooley licked his lips. "Just gimme another one o' them nuggets," he said.

"Clothes come high," Ramey observed and he opened the bottle and shook out a small nugget into Dooley's dirty outstretched palm. He looked keenly at Dooley. "Know a man named Cutler?"

Dooley started visibly. There was a momentary comprehensive light in his eyes, a flash of something Ramey thought was recognition but he shook his head negatively. "Nope. Ain't never heered o' him."

Ramey thought he was lying. But there was nothing he could do about that, except wonder why Dooley would be lying. He took his pack outside. He looked the horse over carefully. With a reputation such as Dooley had earned, he knew he'd have to look close to keep from being robbed. There was no such thing as a fair deal with Dooley. Not ever.

The horse was a young buckskin gelding. Ramey liked it's short barrel and chunky hindquarters. It would find Army acceptance, he thought, except for it's color. "Looks good to me," he said.

"Sure. I treat my friends right, Ramey."

Ramey made his pack secure to the cantle and climbed into the saddle. "Tell your man on the gate to let me through," he said.

"He'll let you out. You ever need help,

Ramey, remember your friend Dooley."

Ramey lifted his reins. "I know about that," he said. "All about it."

He was ready for trouble but the gate opened and he rode through. He stopped his horse a hundred yards from the post but no one followed. He went on then, a thin fingernail of moon not much help in showing him the way. He reached the creek and turned downstream, letting the horse find it's own way. Two hours later he pulled away from the sound of water so he could hear other noises and made a dry camp.

CHAPTER THREE

Owlhoot Boss!

LYING there in the blanket he'd bought from Dooley, with his head on his saddle, he looked at the stars and without thinking much about things, he knew what he'd do. It all seemed so simple, all at once. He'd given the service everything he had, always. And he'd got nothing in return. In trying to perform his duty, he'd smeared his record and was a hunted man. Well, to hell with it, he thought. He had a map that showed where a gold cache was located. If it was anything like the stuff in the bottle he'd never have to worry about money again. That would be something, he thought, after years of penurious living on a lieutenant's pay. He'd take the gold and get out of the country. Change his name and grow a beard. It was a solution, but it left him dissatisfied in spite of the fact that this seemed too obvious a thing for him to do. There was a regret in him that wouldn't be denied.

There was Cutler's girl, too. She had an interest in the gold. Not his fault, he thought savagely, not knowing where she was. The thought came to him that he hadn't looked for her. He could inquire around and he promised himself he would do so. He remembered the picture and for some reason he didn't try to understand he got out the watch and opened it. He could see the girl's face by the dim light of the stars and moon. He had to use his imagination because the light wasn't much. But he remembered. And remembering, he sighed and put the watch away.

At daylight he made a small fire and cooked bacon which he ate with his fingers. He had his pack together when the scout detail rode down the creek. Ramey was holding his pack in his hand when he got on his horse and put the animal downstream. The scout detail's noise faded when he crossed the creek and went into a dry canyon that was strange to him.

As he rode he secured his pack to the back of his saddle and when that was done he stopped and listened. He could hear them again now, as they came into the same canyon, hidden by a turn of the rocky walls. He rode on, pushing the buckskin hard.

The canyon climbed. The sun came over the rim and put it's heat down between the two walls. The horse began to labor and the noise behind Ramey grew louder. He caught a glimpse of them now and again, below him, through the shimmering heat waves.

The buckskin stopped and Ramey had to spur him on. The horse went at a ragged run. He knew it wouldn't hold out much longer. He stopped and got down and let it blow for a minute, cursing Dooley for not giving feed that put a bottom to a horse. The difference between his mount and those of the detail was nothing more than the difference between natural graze and a regular feed of hay and grain.

Ramey was rubbing down his horse's wet lathered legs when he heard the voice. It was a mocking voice that he remembered well. He wheeled with his gun in his hand.

"Put your gun away, Let'nunt," the mocking voice said. "You're among friends."

The voice materialized into a man who came from the rocks, leading his horse.

He was a tall, thin man with sandy hair and a drooping sandy mustache. His thin shoulders sagged and his arms were long and his slender fingers brushed the handles of twin Colts, low on each thigh. He gave Ramey a yellow-toothed grin and said, "I seen you a heap and talked t' you plenty. M' name's Ned Meter."

Ramey stared. "There's a scout detail coming up," he said. "They're close behind me." It was a mild shock to see Meter. Hearing his voice, he'd formed a mental image of how the man appeared. Actually, Meter was nothing like the mental picture he'd conjured up.

"Boss sent me," Meter said. "Don't let that detail worry you none. Jes' foller me." He got on his horse and waited until Ramey mounted and then he rode back into the rocks from where he'd come.

"You been wantin' t' see Boss for a long time," he called over his shoulder. "Guess you'll do it now." Ahead of them a high, flat-topped rock loomed against the hot sky.

There was no trail, it seemed to Ramey. They wandered aimlessly through immense shapeless blobs of rock of all color, surrounded by strange red flat-topped buttes. They went between two huge rocks and down a sharp incline where the horses skidded on their haunches and raised a cloud of choking dust. The barren rock gave way to scrawny brush. They went through the brush and there was a trail of sorts now, where the brush was worn away.

Meter waited until Ramey rode alongside. He pointed to a sharp incline that led to the top of the massive rock. "Only way t' git up thar," he said, "is up that air trail. Come on."

The horses bunched their muscles and cat-hopped up the steep incline. Toward the top, there was a sign, crudely drawn that said, *Hades*. Below that an Apache arrow had been nailed. The incline was pinched in by rocky walls near the top and the last fifty feet was in a narrow steep pass just wide enough for one horse. They came out on top with their horses blowing gustily.

There was a huddle of mud huts there on top of the rock, flat-topped adobes built one on top of the other. There were no trees and the sun beat down with merciless ferocity. A hot wind blew out of the south. Beyond, a pole corral held a dozen horses.

"Hi there, Ned," a voice called and Ramey looked up. There was a lookout with a rifle, sitting under a canvas cover above the trail. Looking over his shoulder, Ramey could see the lookout commanded the approach to the hideout and all the country beyond. "That posse went right on by."

"Warn't no posse, Pete," Meter retorted. "Army fellers lookin' for this'n."

Pete took another look at Ramey. "Why, if'n it ain't the lieutenant," he drawled. "Say, Ned, tell somebody t' come over and spell me. Been here since daylight."

"You got anything better t' do?" Meter asked. "Come on, Ramey." He rode toward the corral and Ramey followed.

AS THEY unsaddled, two men came out of an adobe hut and stood watching them. Ramey had been busy looking the place over and now he spoke, "Where do you keep all those stolen horses?"

Meter looked at him quickly and then threw his saddle over the top bar of the corral fence. "Don't bring any here," he said. "These hosses all go to Fort Estes is Colorady. Fort Estes hosses go to Duchesne, over in Utah. And Fort Duchesne hosses come back to the fort heah. That's how it works."

Ramey nodded, the knowledge making him eager. It was a big ring. Bigger than he or the colonel had thought. His exultation died in him when he remembered the plan was no longer in effect. The colonel was dead and no one else knew how things were. Ramey was on his own and instead of breaking up a ring of horse thieves, he was being taken in by them.

"Quite a system," Ramey said as he put his saddle beside that of Meter's.

Meter allowed a slow smile to spread over his face. "Penny ante," he said, "alongside what Boss is workin' on."

Ramey shook his head. "It wasn't penny ante just figuring the horses you got from us."

Meter gave him a sly look. "Yeah, but there's too much expense, Ramey. You Army men come high. The horse buyer comes higher. Ain't much left for us which do the work." His attitude changed. The old contempt that'd always been in his voice was in his face and his actions. "Come along." He went toward the two men who waited outside the main adobe hut.

When they came up, Meter said, "Boys, this is Ramey."

The two men looked curiously at Ramey but neither of them spoke.

"One o' you boys go down and give Pete a spell," Meter said.

"You go, Shorty," said the taller of the two.

"I'll match you," Shorty said, flipping a silver dollar into the air. "You call it."

"Heads. Aw, dammit to hell." The taller man walked away. Shorty grinned and put his silver dollar back into his pocket.

"How's the gal?" Meter asked.

Shorty shook his head dolefully. "Won't eat nothin', Ned. Red-eyed like she's been cryin' but I ain't seen her cry none."

"Boss been up yet?" Meter looked at Ramey as he asked this question.

Shorty said, "Nope, he sure ain't."

"You've a girl up here?" Ramey wanted to know.

Meter showed his yellow teeth. "Don't get so damn nosey," he said and went on into the adobe. He stopped in the doorway. "Throw your stuff in any o' these 'dobes, Ramey."

Ramey walked along the line of flat-topped adobe houses and found an empty one on the end. It was a bare ten paces from the adobe to the sheer drop off of the rock. He threw his pack in on the floor and walked over to the edge. He could see the country stretching away into the unmeasurable distances. He looked downward, amazed and slightly awed at the space that fell away at his feet.

Shorty, the bandy-legged outlaw came over and squinted out into space as he hunkered down on his heels. "A sight o' hole thar. Alluz get dizzy lookin'."

"Where do you get water?" Ramey wanted to know.

"Holes in th' rock," Shorty said. "Use 'em fer reservoirs. Rain comes jes' right to keep 'em filled. Shore a natcheral hideout, ain't hit?" He was short and squat with yellowed snags for teeth. His grin was hideous but he was friendly.

"What was that Meter said about a girl?" Ramey asked.

"She's purty as a picture," Shorty said. "Sure nuff a looker. Boss says her old man got a heap o' Spanish gold buried somers 'round here. Boss says her old man gonna show us whar that air gold is if'n he wants his gal back."

Some things fell into place for Ramey. "That'd be Cutler," he said. "Is her name Esther—or Estelle?"

Shorty looked up, his ugly face innocent of guile. "Reckon you know her," he said. "Her last name sure is Cutler. And the first part is Esther, that's for dang sure."

Ramey turned and went toward Meter's hut. He entered without knocking. The room was empty but he could hear voices beyond an inner door that was covered with burlap. He went across the room and pushed the burlap aside. Meter was standing over the girl who was tied in a chair. She was twisting and straining at her bonds while Meter leaned closer, laughing.

"Don't do it," Ramey said.

Meter stopped laughing and straightened. "Get out o' here," he said, and he laid his hand on one of his guns.

"No," Ramey said. "Boss won't like it,

(Continued on page 94)

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(Continued from page 92)

Meter, you running things like this. I don't like it either."

Meter's lip curled. "You don't like it," he repeated, sneering. "You double-dealin' little coyote—what the hell do I care what you like or don't like?" He jerked his head. "Now get outa here."

"After you," Ramey said gently. The girl was staring, a light of hope in her dark eyes.

Meter looked at him for a moment, his eyelids drooping over his yellow-centered eyes. His hand moved but Ramey's gun was looking at him. Meter looked at the gun in Ramey's hand and then he slowly removed his hand from his gun and walked past Ramey and savagely brushed the burlap aside and stalked through.

Ramey heard his footsteps cross the room and fade outside. He put his gun away.

The girl said, "You're not one of them." The hope that flickered in her eyes was now a shining light.

Ramey considered that for a moment and then he shook his head reluctantly. "I guess I am," he said.

Her face changed so that he could see it and the hope was a memory.

HE WENT over beside her chair and said, "I'll see he doesn't bother you. I promise." His fingers were busy with the ropes that had her secured to the chair. He dropped them on the floor and she rubbed first one wrist then the other. "Don't see why you have to be tied. There's no place you can go."

She looked past him, almost fearfully. "It's Meter," she whispered. "He wants me tied. So he can paw me and kiss me. He tried it when I wasn't tied. I scratched him. Since then he's kept me tied." She shuddered and then lifted her shoulders. "You don't look like one of them."

"Looks are deceiving," he said.

She moved her head. "No, I can tell. You're not. Just why are you here?"

He had felt the need to tell someone. He wanted to tell her and he did, omitting nothing except his chance meeting with her dying father. He ended by grinning crookedly at her and saying, "I didn't have much choice in the matter."

She thought about it for a long moment in studied silence then she said, "You must be in love with this girl Sylvia. Aren't you?"

He wanted to laugh but he didn't. "Maybe I was," he said, thinking that out of everything he'd told her, she should seize on the few words with which he'd mentioned Sylvia Bullock. He repeated, "Maybe I was," because he'd said it the first time without thinking about it and now he found it to be true. Or almost true. Maybe he'd never been in love with her.

"What about this Corporal Bane?" she asked. "If he did overhear you and the colonel talking maybe he would testify that your arrest was just a plan to trap Boss's gang. Have you thought about that?"

He nodded. "I thought of it. But I think Bane killed the colonel. If he did he'd like to see me blamed for it. I got his gun when we fought there in the colonel's quarters. Afterwards I found two spent shells in it. He shot at me once, I remember that one shot. I think the other bullet was used to kill the colonel."

"But there's no way to prove it," she said.

"Not now there isn't," he said, "but sometime—"

"Ramey!" It was Meter, outside the hut.

Ramey started for the door.

"Be careful," she whispered, putting out her hand. "He's a killer. A mean killer."

He smiled at her once and brushed the burlap aside. This was the man he'd been trying to see for the last six months. Boss was as elusive as the hot winds that fanned through the Perdido Mountains. "Where?"

"Outside. Come on." Meter stood back from the door.

Ramey walked to the door and stepped into the dazzling sunlight, squinting his eyes against the glare.

The big man on the horse smiled broadly at Ramey and slowly closed one eye. "It's your old friend, Lieutenant," he said.

Ramey gave Meter a quick look. The gunman slouched negligently against the wall, pulling at his sandy mustache and grinning wickedly. Ramey let out a deep sigh. "So you're Boss?" he asked.

"Ain't you glad t' see me?" Dooley asked still smiling broadly. He got down from his horse and walked over to Ramey, holding out his dirty hand. "Gimme that air buckskin pouch, Ramey."

"By God, you'll have to take it," Ramey said.

Meter had his gun in his hand and he thumbed the hammer to full cock. "Let *me* take it off'n him, Boss," he said and his eyes flamed and his lips went tight around his yellow teeth. "I'd like t' do it."

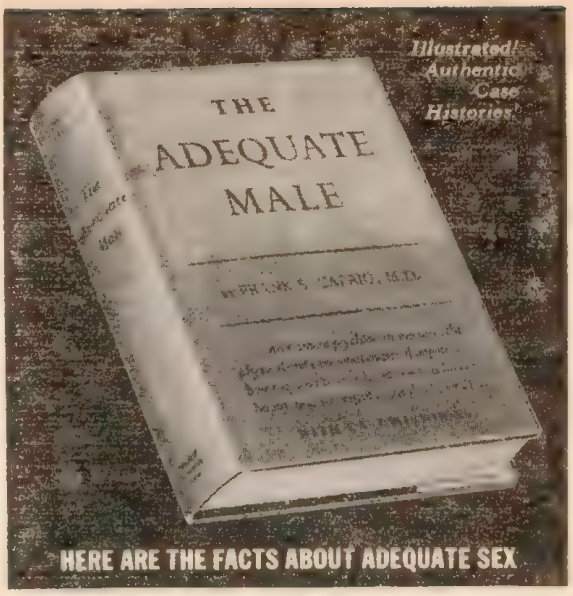
Ramey felt his stomach muscles tighten but he didn't move, watching Dooley's face for a sign of acquiescence. Dooley's beady eyes didn't waver off Ramey's.

"Put yore shootin' arn up, Ned," he said without looking at Meter. "I said, put it up!"

Meter shoved his gun back in its scabbard and stalked sulkily away.

"He'll kill you if'n he gets a half a chance," Dooley said. "An' one p'int sartin about Ned: He'd jes' soon shoot you in back as front." He walked away from Ramey and went over to the edge of the rock and sat down, motioning for Ramey to follow.

Ramey walked to Dooley and stood there, watching Dooley use a razor sharp knife to cut a piece of chewing tobacco. He held the tobacco between his thumb and knife blade and carried it to his mouth. He chewed placidly for a few minutes and then he squirted tobacco juice over the cliff and said, "You're actin' like a dad-gum fool."



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"I've been accused of that before now," Ramey said.

"Ye-es? Wal, I can see why. Now they's no use me an' you not gettin' along like a pair o' mules hitched t' the same load."

Ramey thought about that and he said, "Soon as you got what you wanted, bang. Bang being me with a bullet in me."

Dooley shook his bald head. "Nope. I like you, Ramey. You made me a lot o' money the past six months and you didn't rob me doin' it. Some o' them Army hoss buyers gouged me worse'n you did and you could o' done it better'n 'em if you'd been a mind t' do it." He blinked and licked his lips. "I got an idee you know something, Ramey."

"What about the girl?" Ramey asked. "What about her, Dooley?"

Dooley leaned forward and squirted tobacco juice and wiped the spent tail-end of the charge from his beard with the back of his hand. "She's sure fire piece o' bait," he said. "Old Sam Cutler'll come runnin' when he hears about her bein' here. An' when he quits runnin' he'll know what he gotta do."

Ramey felt his body tremble and his heart pounded. He kept his voice even. "Sam Cutler is dead, Dooley."

Dooley's big head swung around and he put his bright beady eyes on Ramey. "You know what you're talkin' about?"

"I buried him myself," Ramey said. "Apaches got him."

"I'll be switched," Dooley said. He licked his lips. "I guess that air gal ain't gon' be much use. Here I done figgered she'd make me a rich man. Wal, goes t' show you, Ramey."

"Maybe we can make a deal, anyway."

Dooley's eyes didn't flicker. "How's that, lad?" he asked with a kindly look.

"I know where Cutler's gold is cached."

Dooley nodded. "Kind o' figgered you did. Now, what kin we trade, Ramey?"

"We'll split two ways," Ramey said, "and I'll take the girl."

"Three ways," Dooley said. "Two for me and one for you. I gotta divvy with all my boys. Wouldn't cut them out, Ramey."

"Not unless you could get away with it."

"You're too dang hard on me," complained Dooley, but he grinned as he said it. He got to his feet and they faced each other. "Hit's a bargain, Ramey. You kin have the paleface wench. Now me, I like Injun gals."

"The Apaches'll take you apart in little pieces one of these days," Ramey said. "And I can't say as I'd blame them much."

AT SUNDOWN Boss Dooley rode down the trail that led from the rock. The men drifted in from various parts of the mesa, to gather in front of the 'dobe hut that served as a mess hall. There was a round dozen of the toughest aggregation Ramey had ever laid eyes on. Killers, all of them, wearing their guns low and tied down. Wearing that reckless air of men who've made the big pitch that put them beyond the pale. Their utter disregard for human life showed in their talk but mostly it showed in their cold eyes.

No laughing, joking carefree puncher or trooper among these men. Their talk was morose and scanty. They held themselves aloof from one another, jealous of each other's gun skill, edgy, wanting to know who was fastest, with a deadly curiosity. Held together only by their common need and their hatred of law and order. And their fear of Boss Dooley.

The one exception was Odie, the youngest of the lot. He was not more than eighteen or nineteen, Ramey judged. He was a husky youngster, with big shoulders and curly yellow hair and a pimply face covered with dirtyish fuzz. He swaggered and swore, told filthy jokes and drifted from one group to another, loud-mouthed and obscene. He stopped in front of Ramey, stood with his booted feet far apart, his shoulders drooping. He curled his lip. "New man, huh?"

No one spoke, but their eyes all turned on Ramey who leaned negligently against the sunbaked adobe wall. Ramey pointedly ignored Odie.

A red flush crept up Odie's face. His little eyes darted to the right and left to see if he had an audience. He saw they all were watching. "A new man," he repeated, and then added: "If a tinhorn soldier boy really is a man."

Ramey came away from the wall. He slapped the kid with the palm of his right hand and then brought it back, hard. Odie's head dipped to the left and to the right under the impact of Ramey's open hand. He stepped back, his jaws carrying red welts, his eyes popping. His cheeks swelled and his arm crooked.

"Reach for that gun and I'll slap you silly," Ramey said.

"Don't draw!" yelled Ned Meter.

Odie looked around uncertainly as Ramey resumed his former position against the wall. "I'll get you for that," he said threateningly.

"Leave me alone," Ramey said, "or I'll slap you off this rock. Now get from in front of me before I lose my temper."

Odie slunk away and disappeared around the corner of the adobe.

Shorty chortled, "That young'un sure been askin' for it."

The others agreed in a disinterested way. They seemed disappointed. Only Ned Meter kept his silence, shooting his dark glances Ramey's way.

Ramey knew that Dooley had told Meter that Ramey was coming in on the deal. The thin gunman was sulking about it. But he was careful. He'd seen Ramey pull a gun and he wasn't forgetting it. No doubt, Ramey thought, that was the reason for his yelled warning to Odie.

Ramey came away from the wall again, seeing their speculative looks. He spoke to them all but he looked at Meter. "I made a deal with Boss," he said. "I know where

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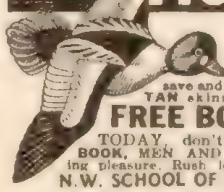

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Cutler's gold is cached. I get a share of the gold plus the girl. Boss agreed to this. I'm keeping the girl with me from now on." He went around them and into Meter's adobe. He crossed the room and pushed the burlap aside.

She was standing inside the inner door. She backed away a step or two as he came in. "I heard," she said. Her face was white, her eyes big. "I heard what you told them. You know where my father is?"

"You got anything with you? Any other clothes, personal belongings?"

She began to cry. "You didn't answer me. Do you know?"

"Stop it!" he said sharply. "You answer me."

She said, "No. I had no time to bring anything with me. Except what I wore at the time."

"I'm taking you to my 'dobe. I can look out for you better there."

"What—what are you going to do?" she asked. "I thought you—"

He stepped close to her and took her shoulders in his two hands and shook her hard enough to bounce her hair. "Listen to me," he said, low-voiced. "I'm doing the best I can. I mean you no harm. I'm trying to make it possible for you to get away from here unharmed, understand?" He shook her again.

She nodded dumbly. "If I could only trust you," she said.

"Dammit, you've got to," he grated. "There's nothing else you can do. I can't tell you everything because it wouldn't be safe. I've talked too much now. But remember this, do exactly as I tell you all the time and I'll do my best for you. Understand?"

"You're hurting me," she said, moving her shoulders.

He dropped his hands. "All right. Now come with me." His voice was rougher than necessary.

She was stepping on his heels when he reached the outside door. A gun went off almost in Ramey's face and heard the lethal whine of the bullet that dusted his shirt. He dropped to one side of the door, pushing the girl down with him. Screened by the wall he got to his feet, his hand pressuring the girl to stay where she was. He felt her quiver under his touch.

"I got the dirty son," Meter called exultantly.

"Count me out o' this," a voice said. "Boss'll be madder'n hellfire."

"I didn't have nothin' to do with it," another chimed in.

Meter came to the door and Ramey kicked him in the belly. The gun went off again but Ramey had it pushed away. He twisted hard and Meter grunted as the gun fell. Ramey got his hand in Meter's stringy hair and yanked forward. His left fist crashed into a spot behind Meter's ear. Meter's head dropped and Ramey brought his knee up with a vicious swing and caught Meter full in the face. There was an ugly crunch and Meter catapaulted backward and fell heavily. He didn't get up.

Ramey reached for the girl and brought her out beside him. He walked her along the line of adobe's to the end one he'd claimed. He pushed her inside and said, "Stay there."

"He'll kill you," she whispered. "He'll kill you, Ramey!"

"No," Ramey said. "I'll be watching. I should have let him have it. But Dooley wouldn't like that. He'd use it as an excuse to break his word to me."

"Watch him," she breathed. "Oh, please watch him, Ramey." She said it prayerfully.

He stood there for a moment, looking at her dim shape in the darkness of the adobe. He laughed a brittle laugh. "I will. I won't get killed and leave you all alone."

She caught her breath and he thought she was crying. He said gently, "I think everything's going to be all right."

She looked up at him, trustingly. "All right," she said and they moved away from the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell's Fortune

THROUGH the next three days, Ramey kept to his own adobe and watched more men gather on the rock. These newcomers were of the same breed as the others. Whiskey appeared on the blankets where the card games were held. Shooting matches were spontaneous outbursts of sparodiac gunfire. As more and more men gathered into the small confining space, there was gun brawls and knife fights. Each day saw the tension mount until Dooley appeared.

The camp on the rock quieted down with Boss Dooley's presence. Dooley came to Ramey's adobe shortly after his arrival.

"I guess you had a right to kill Ned," he told Ramey, "an' maybe it woulda been better if you had. I'm a-gettin' whar you're causin' mé too much hinder, Ramey."

"I didn't kill him," Ramey said coolly, "because I figured you thought him valuable. Let him cross me again and I'll do it."

Dooley looked at him. "You don't want to do that leetle chore, Ramey," he said, "for if'n you did, I'd be in a terrible twist o' having to kill a man I liked." He squirted a stream of tobacco juice. "Don't say I ain't give you plenty o' warnin'," and with that he stalked away.

Twenty-six men and a girl rode down the incline the morning after Dooley arrived. It was a silent, bitter column of lost men who'd kill for a silver dollar. The land ahead of them appeared to undulate up and down ceaselessly. At the head of the column, Ramey said, "Apache Peak."

Dooley looked at him with his beady black eyes. "I smelled tizwin cookin' yesterday, comin' in. I ain't seen no sign an' that's bad. Apache's air roamin' an' that's for sartin."

"We can turn back," Ramey suggested. "When the Indians start cooking it stirs

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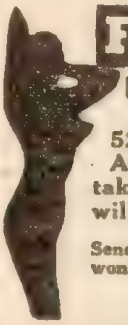

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them up like a nest of hornets."

"Not for the devil hisself," Dooley declared. "That's a sight of that stuff you got in your bottle, Ramey. Enough to make every man here and his brother rich."

"These men here—they know nothing of the Apaches," Ramey warned.

Dooley grinned. "An' they won't larn, Ramey. They's all fast shooters and can ride a hoss if'n it don't act up too much. But Injuns is something out'n their line." He added, "That's part o' your job—watchin' for Injuns."

The air was thin and like heat from a blast furnace. When Ramey drank from his canteen the metal neck burned him. The dust lay like a coating of powder on his face and burned the tender creases of his neck. He wondered how the girl stood it. She was pale and stoical. Riding between him and Dooley, she looked at him frequently, but when he turned to catch her glance she was always looking away.

He tried to compare her with Sylvia Bullock, but he couldn't dredge up a satisfactory image of the colonel's daughter, try as he would. He gave up this unsatisfactory thinking and looked ahead. Apache Peak seemed to recede before them.

They nooned on the edge of a dry wash and while the others spread out and sought what scanty shade there was, Ramey rode ahead. Before leaving to scout, he took Esther aside and said, "Stay close to Dooley. All these toughs are afraid of him. No harm'll come to you as long as you stay with Dooley."

She shivered in the burning heat. "He frightens me. The way he looks. The way he talks."

"He'll keep his word," Ramey said. "And he's promised me I can have you."

She looked at him strangely but said nothing.

Dooley rode out after Ramey. "Don't get no wild notions," he said warningly.

"I figured by leaving the girl you'd know I wasn't thinking of it," Ramey said bluntly. "Keep those wolves away from her."

Dooley grinned. "Wolves? More like coyotes."

Riding on, Ramey reflected that Dooley was well aware of the caliber of his men. Perhaps that's how he wanted it to be. Sometimes in the past, he'd thought the western service attracted all the criminal element in the Army, but he knew differently now. These cavalrymen were a tough, stringy breed, or else they wouldn't be serving where they were. The actual bad men and misfits were quickly weeded out. A new respect for the troopers who'd served under him was born in Ramey through his association with Dooley's gang.

Away from the main body of men, Ramey put to use some of the things he'd learned from Crick Jackson and from his own three years of campaigning. He found sign where a sizeable body of Apache's on the move had crossed their intended track. He sat there with a troubled frown on his face, and thought about the chances of getting through without a brush.

The Apaches were rising up all over. The young bucks were kiting out of the reservations, taking as many warriors as they could talk into leaving with them. Small bands of them were spotted through the Perdido, looting, killing and raping where they could find their prey. Thinking about the ceaseless campaign that went on, Ramey had a premonition of trouble. He sighed, thinking of the more than a score of skilled gunfighters back there with Dooley. It took more than skill at shooting a gun to cope with the Apaches, he knew. It took men with a healthy respect for the cunning and stealth of the fierce desert fighters.

He climbed the most prominent rise in the immediate vicinity. He left his horse below the skyline and climbed over the hot rocks on foot, feeling the sweat squish in his boots as he went higher. Dark streaks of sweat stained his shirt where the cloth touched his body. He gained the summit and made his search, wishing for the bi-

noculars he habitually carried. Off to his right, south of Apache Peak, three powdery smoke balls hung in the hot blue sky. He watched the signal for a moment and went back to his horse.

"Apaches on the move," he told Dooley. "A large party right close at this minute. More ahead." He told him of the smoke signals.

"You're head man," Dooley said. "You'll take steps to make sure they don't pop up behind a rock and let fly."

Ramey gave him a thin smile. "That," he said, "is something I can't guarantee. The best we can do is get men out. Tell them to keep their eyes open."

There was some grumbling when Dooley ordered the men out to scout. He cursed them down with a withering string of expletives and the outriders rode out without more than a dark look at Ramey.

Ramey knew they blamed him for everything.

THEY stopped for water at a high pool and even the girl saw the unshod tracks around it. She looked quickly at Ramey and Ramey looked away.

"Not so long ago," Ramey muttered. "They're like a bunch of hornets, Dooley."

"Whar's that damned Army?" Dooley growled, and then threw back his head and laughed uproariously. His laughter stopped as suddenly as it started. "By damn—them Injuns run into us, they'll know what shootin's like."

"They're scared to death, Dooley."

"They'd a damn sight better be," Dooley said and then looked sharply at Ramey. "You're funnin', man."

At sundown, with the shape of Apache Peak looming above them, they went into camp among a cluster of boulders deep in the heart of the Perdido Mountains. The horses were hobbled and put on picket close by under a couple of grumbling guards. Other guards were sent out a dis-

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tance from the camp. The violently-colored sky paled to a blackish gray tinged with pink and gold and dusk settled over them with the solid black of the desert night hovering above. The little fires were bloody eyes on the sterile earth.

Ramey and Esther made their meal together, away from the others as usual. He was restless and he raised his head time and time again to listen. The stifling heat held on. Someone was blowing a mouth organ and near the biggest fire four men held the corners of a blanket and laid it down stretching it tight for the inevitable card game. A whiskey bottle appeared and Ramey shook his head.

She asked, "Where's it all going to end, Ramey?"

"If the Indians hold off, it'll be a fight among themselves," he said. "If they don't hold off, we'll have to fight them and then settle the other."

"A dreary future," she said, not at all sadly and he looked sharply at her to see her first smile. She explained, "I suppose I'm gaining confidence in you."

He didn't try to show her the error of that thinking.

Dooley came over and jerked his head at Ramey. They walked to one side, and Dooley said, "They 'uns gettin' spooky, Ramey." He nodded toward the cluster of outlaws around their fires.

"They must be getting smart," Ramey said sarcastically.

Dooley shook his head. "Not in 'em. What I want t' talk about is somethin' else, Ramey. You know what kind o' organization I always had."

"No."

"Wal, it was a good 'un," Dooley went on after a sharp look at Ramey. "These here boys come frum Colorado, Utah and somewhere's else. I pulled 'em all in, 'cause I figgered hoss stealin' wasn't gonna last much longer. Not the way I'm doin' it, nohow."

Ramey kept silent.

"See, these here boys, they gettin' me all riled. I'm 'bout finished with 'em. Now me and you, we could go a long spell pullin' together, I figger."

"You want to take the gold and lose them. Is that it?"

"Wal, ye-es. Now how far are we from that gold?"

"A couple of hours ride," Ramey said. He wondered if he could figure from the surroundings what Cutler meant by the word *Key H* Maybe the terrain would solve the puzzle for him. If not, he knew Dooley and his men would waste no time. They'd shoot him to pieces.

"That's a pleasin' thought," Dooley said. "What do you say, Ramey?"

"I'm with you," Ramey said stolidly.

Dooley put out a huge hand. "I reckoned you would," he said with evident satisfaction.

In his blanket with the girl nearby, Ramey had his wrestling match with his conscience again. He knew he'd told Dooley he'd team up with him only to further his own plans. But now the hard fact remained that his decision to quit Army life forever was not a decision but a delaying action. He turned interminably but sleep was not for him. He rose and went silently off into the darkness, feeling the old loneliness settle down on him. It was always like that, he thought There were too many decisions to make just in simple terms of living. It should not be that way, he thought. The hard decisions a man had to make should mean something far more than that. Sitting there away from camp, he got the whiff of cooking mesquite root and he knew the Apaches would be wild-eyed when they did come. Normally reckless, the liquor they made rendered them senselessly impervious to danger sign? Ramey stood up and went through the camp looking for Dooley.

He found the burly outlaw and shook him awake. "Get 'em all moving," Ramey said. "We got to get on up there. Apaches might try us if we leave after daylight."

Dooley raised no objections. He booted the growling, grumbling outlaws awake and in a short time they were climbing again. A moon came from behind a distant peak and threw a ghostly light on them and softening the harsh contours of their surroundings.

At daylight they pulled into a crook of a tiny trickle that was the head of Perdido Creek and made camp. While the men wrangled over where they'd place their camp, Ramey left his horse and scouted on foot the surrounding country. He found nothing that would lead him to the puzzle. The cross, marking the cache was just below the peak, where a jumble of rocks looked as though a gigantic hand had pushed them up and down centuries before.

Sweaty and discouraged, Ramey came back to the camp. Ned Meter stood aside with Esther. The girl was between Meter and the rocks, and from the look on her face Meter had been there for some time.

METER'S face expressed satisfaction as he stood there looking at Ramey. "I'm takin' her back," he said in a deadly voice.

"You know how to do that," Ramey said. "Get away from the girl."

A smile twitched at Meter's mouth. Odie came around the rocks and they stood together and yet far enough apart to do what was in their minds.

"Dammit, get!" Dooley bawled as he swung toward them.

Meter and Odie stared at each other and then drifted away.

"Where in hades ya been?" Dooley growled, glaring at Meter and Odie where they lingered, but speaking to Ramey.

"Scouting," Ramey said shortly. "We want guards out, Dooley, all the time. These mountains are swarming with wide-eyes Apaches and I've no intentions of leaving my bones up here."

Dooley shrugged. "These here men o' mine," he said, "are gettin' harder an'

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harder to handle, Ramey. I dunno. Guess I'll hafter kill one 'r two. Hey, you, Odie," he called to the boy. "You grab Nels and Oscar and a couple more and scatter out 'round here and keep your eyes open."

Odie laughed and said, "To hell with that. Let's dig up that gold."

There was no change in Dooley's face when he fired. His hand jerked, the powder drifting over past Ramey's face. Odie's laugh died and he grabbed his middle with both hands, a protest on his lips. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. He fell where he stood. Sweat still stood on his face as he lay there. "You boys drag him off down the gulch," Dooley said. "Far nuff away so's he won't bother us when the sun hits him good. Rest o' you shuffle on out and guard this damn place."

Odie was pulled out of sight. The guards scattered. Dooley said, "You and me, we're gonna dig up that air gold right now."

Ramey said, "Maybe I'd better do more scouting. I can smell an Indian."

"Boys got everythin' covered," Dooley said, frowning. "Now, let's us get down to spades, Ramey, and damn quick."

A shout went up from one of the guards and Ramey and Dooley turned. Ramey breathed a sigh of relief. It was a horseman and the guard waved him on. Just enough of a respite to give him a chance to look around again. The gold cache had to be somewhere near here. He said, "I'm going to take a look around, Dooley."

Dooley held up his big hand and there was a strange grin on his face. "Jes' a minute, soldier," he said. "Jes' one leetle minute. Right here is a feller wants to see you."

The horseman came pounding on, raising the dust. His horse was lathered and near winded. He pulled up and jumped down and jerked the neckerchief from his face. He smiled at Ramey, an easy smile with malice in it and said, "Good to see you, Lieutenant."

Ramey's mouth was dry. All he could say was, "Bane, by God."

Bane dipped his head. "Yes, sir," he murmured. "At your service, sir. Always."

Dooley was grinning widely. "Ain't that somethin'?" he roared. "Hell, Ramey, if'n you could a seen the look on your own face, you'd die laughin'."

"He'll die all right," Bane said smoothly, "but not laughing. I can assure you."

Dooley licked his lips. He held his gun ready. "I reckon we ain't gonna pull no damn Injun trick on him," he said. "Jes' a nice clean bullet right whar it'll do most good. Right after he tells me whar that gold is waitin' to be dug up."

"You're wasting your time," Ramey said coldly. "I won't tell you."

"Thar's enough o' us to find hit," Dooley said softly, "if'n we hafter turn over all the rocks 'round here." He raised his gun.

The first yipping sounds came to them then and turned the camp upside down. Dooley swung around tugging at the arrow in his shoulder and Bane ran around in crazy circles trying to get the arrow from his back. Bane fell down with his back arched, still trying to reach the arrow. He was in that position when he died.

Ramey ran for the rocks, pulling Esther with him. He shot and his gun bucked in his hand and a brown shape spilled from a racing pinto. Ramey ran into Shorty and gave him a shove. "Cover the other side," he said. He crooked his arm and fired again and another Apache dove for the earth with a shrill cry that stopped on a high note.

The firing was thickest where the men had congregated below Ramey. There was a flurry going on there, with the Indians in at close quarters, blotting out all save a flash of blue denim now and then. Others pressed in against the cluster of rocks and Ramey's gun grew hot. The Apaches piled up around the natural fort.

"Bring that keg up here," Ramey shouted to Dooley who was fighting his

way toward them. "Bring that blasting powder, Dooley!"

Esther had found guns somewhere. She passed them to him. He fired, his hand jerking and he could hear Shorty firing steadily from the other side.

DOOLEY staggered in carrying a small keg. He was shirtless, with blood coursing down his arm from the shoulder wound. His great hair-covered chest rose and fell with exertion. "This'll let 'em know who's boss," he panted.

Ramey said, "Keep your gun going." He knelt beside the keg and punched a hole in it. He tore a strip off his shirt and dribbled powder into it like it was a cigaret paper. This done he rolled the strip of cloth and holding both ends of the eighteen inch strip in his hands, he twisted it tightly and thumbed slip knots through each end. He shoved one end of his home-made fuse into the keg and used another strip of cloth to wedge it in tight.

The Indians had finished their bloody work down below and had pulled off to regroup. They meant to charge the rock cluster that held the last resistance.

"I'll wait until they start up," Ramey said. "See if Shorty's all right."

"Can't move," grumbled Dooley. "Jes' picked up a arrer in m' leg."

The flint head had penetrated the big muscle of Dooley's leg and the outlaw was trying to worry it through.

"Cut it," Ramey said. "Cut it off and pull the shaft out." He gave Esther a quick look. She'd picked up all the guns and had them stacked in an easily accessible spot. He smiled at her and started through the rocks. He stopped. He could see Shorty's boots around an edge of brown rock but that wasn't what stopped him. The wind and rain had hollowed out the rocks here. He stood in a short passageway. The passageway was in the form and shape of a keyhole, slanting inward from the bottom

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to a point where his shoulders brushed the rock and then rounding over his head. He looked over his shoulder. Dooley was still trying to get the arrow out of his leg. Ramey went on through. Shorty was dead with his hideous snags showing in a grotesque smile. Ramey came back through the notch and he mentally estimated the ten paces where a fortune lay buried. A fortune for the man who dug it up and was strong enough to take it out.

He came back where the keg was waiting, small and deadly.

"They're getting ready to come back," Esther said quietly.

He nodded and pushed the guns closer to his position. He squatted there, squinting his eyes against the hard hot light, watching the milling ponies below.

Esther said, "There are shells in the guns. And no more."

The Apaches came with a rush, their yipping cries splitting the heat and Ramey knew they were brash with tiswin. He emptied his gun, watched two brown bodies plunge from their running horses. The powder smoke from Dooley's gun stung his face and the sharp odor of powder was in his nostrils. Ramey got another gun and emptied that and then another. Still they came on.

Ramey got out a match and scratched it aflame against a rock. He held it to the fuse he'd made. It sizzled out and his heart dropped and then bounded again as it spluttered. It was going with a steady hiss of sparks when he leaped up to the top of the rock that protected him. He stood poised there for a moment and the shrill yipping was stopped. Then it broke again as he heaved the keg, aiming for a rock-free area. The keg bounded and rolled, struck a boulder and lodged for an agonizing second. It teetered and rolled on and was encompassed by the charging Indians.

Horses and men, bits of flesh, guns and shattered rocks filled the air.

Those left split and spread and ran in all directions. Ramey and Dooley fired on those who blindly stumbled up the mountain toward their rocky retreat.

The last of them disappeared as though a giant hand had wiped them away. There was a stench of gunpowder and death in the air. The sprawling bodies, naked brown ones with the outlaws were down below.

Dooley sat back on his heels and wiped his bloody hands on the hair of his chest. "Reckon just you an me left," he muttered. "Jes' one too many, Ramey." He raised his gun and his finger curled on the trigger. There was a loud click. He threw the gun down and reached for another.

"They're all empty," Esther said.

Ramey looked curiously at Dooley. "Mine too," he said dryly.

Dooley rose to his feet like a lumbering bear. He yanked out the knife at his belt. "Reckon this'll hafter do," he said and stumbled toward Ramey. Ramey stepped back, pulling his own knife. His heel hit a stone and he flopped back, landing on his shoulders. Dooley fell forward on him, attempting to drive his knife into Ramey's chest.

Ramey caught the clublike arm but Dooley's great weight struck him and knocked the breath out of his body. He had enough sense left to hang on to the huge arm. He held and with his other hand he struck at Dooley. The giant outlaw grabbed Ramey's hand in a vicelike grip, broke the blow, and the two men holding each other's knife hand rolled over and over, Ramey feeling the great weight each time Dooley rolled on him.

Using his great strength, Dooley turned Ramey's hand until the knife point touched his throat. Ramey felt the great body tense. He knew Dooley was going to press down and there was nothing he could do to keep the razor sharp point out of his throbbing jugular.

In desperation he gave a superhuman shove and slipped sideways. The giant plunged into Ramey's knife.

Ramey leaped to his feet. The giant was bareheaded now, his bald head gleaming whitely in the sun. He struggled up to his hands and knees, making an inhuman sound and the blood poured out in a thick, bright red stream, spilling over the brown rocks. He bared his teeth at Ramey and then his eyes clouded and he slumped to the ground. Flies buzzed at the crimson spreading out from beneath his body.

ESTHER lay on the ground, her hands over her face. She was unconscious. Ramey staggered over to her and straightened out her body. He unloosened her shirtwaist and saw the soft swell underneath. He chafed her wrists and used his hat to make a breeze over her white face. She stirred and her eyes opened wide to rest on his face. She gave a glad cry and reached out for him and held him while she sobbed.

He let her cry, feeling a tenderness creep over him, a deep tenderness that was different from anything he'd felt before. He wanted to comfort her.

When she'd cried herself out she used his neckerchief to dry her eyes. She smiled at him and said, "That's a woman's right, Ramey."

He said, "I've something for you." He gave her Sam Cutler's watch then and watched her snap it open and look at her own picture. "I saw that picture for the first time when—when I buried your dad." He stopped and waited for another outburst but she kept silent, looking at the watch.

"Somehow I knew he was gone," she said sadly.

"I saw your picture and something happened to me," Ramey went on. "I guess I fell in love with your picture. And after I saw you I knew I was in love with you."

She lifted her eyes to his. There was a tremulous smile on her lips. "I love you too, Ramey," she said. She came into his

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arms. Her lips were warm and her body unresisting and as he kissed her she pressed fiercely against him.

"Oh, God," he said.

"I was an Army officer, Esther," he said heavily. "I guess I've got to go back and face them. You know how it is?"

She nodded. "I know. I'll wait. I'll go with you and wait outside the post until they turn you loose."

He smiled and his smile didn't tell her he was thinking he wouldn't be released. There'd be that volley at sunrise and then a fast trip to the post burying ground. But he knew he'd go. And there was a bare chance he could convince them. He meant to return Bane's body to the post.

He said, "That sounds good to me." He showed her Cutler's map, with it's message on the opposite side. "Half the gold's yours," he said with a smile.

"You can have my half," she smiled back at him, and they laughed together.

The gold was there just as Sam Cutler had said. There was more than Ramey could carry at one load. He solved the problem by placing the leather bags on two horses, Bane's body on one, their camping equipment on another. Then he and Esther rode down the canyon, hazing their pack animals before them. On the weltering flat below, Ramey made lead ropes and they went ahead, pulling the pack animals after them.

THE fort was there in front of them in the yellow searing heat. The flag lay lifeless against the staff and as they approached, Mezo's dogs ran out barking. They splashed across the creek and went up to the gates that were open during daylight hours. Esther's face was apprehensive and Ramey laid his hand on hers.

"Won't be long now," he said.

She smiled without enthusiasm.

Passing through the familiar portals, Ramey called, "Send for the duty officer."

They went on past the Post sutler's, the stables and blacksmith shop, the enlisted men's mess and guardhouse and Ramey pulled in his horse against Esther's.

Peggy Van Horn came to the door when the sound of their horses stopped. She was her slender self again.

"What was it, a boy or girl?" Ramey asked, grinning through his heavy beard.

"Steve Ramey!" Her eyes were wide and she came out and when he was on the ground she kissed his cheek. "A boy, of course. Claude demanded it." She glanced at Esther.

Steve helped Esther to the ground. "Esther, this is Peggy—my best friend's wife. Peggy Van Horn. Peg, will you help us?"

"You know I will," she said without hesitation. "If you'll only tell me." She answered his unspoken question. "Van's on patrol. He'll be back soon. I thought you were he."

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said. His smile faded. "Guess I won't have more time. Keep Esther with you until we know what's going to happen." He looked at Esther. "Peggy'll take good care of you."

She came against him and laid her head against his chest and he stroked her hair. He met Peg's eyes over Esther's head and he shook his head with only a hint of the turmoil that was inside of him.

The officer of the day was Captain Purdy. He stood behind Ramey and when Ramey turned, Purdy said, "Glad you're back, Steve."

Steve said, "The fatted calf and all that stuff."

Purdy said, "At least it'll make the General ease up. Come along. He's waiting."

"I'm under arrest I suppose?"

"I don't know anything, Steve," Purdy said, "except the general's been hard to live with since he got here. The colonel's replacement hasn't arrived yet, and the general plays commanding officer with a vengeance."

"These horses, take good care of them," Ramey said. "Bane's body is under the canvas. The other holds Spanish gold that belongs to Miss Cutler—she's with Peggy now and will stay until—until later."

Purdy nodded. "Keep moving. I'll see the animals are cared for."

"Steve! Steve Ramey!"

Ramey wheeled. It was Sylvia Bullock.

"Don't keep the general waiting, Steve, please."

"That I won't," Ramey answered Purdy. He stood there wondering what it was about Sylvia Bullock that had attracted him. She appeared spoiled and for the first time he noticed her petulant lips. He said gravely, "It's nice to see you again."

She looked at him with her eyes opened wide. "Is that all you've got to say, Steve?"

"Actually, I'm surprised that you'd see me," he said. "What is there to say?"

He saw the tears start and he was unmoved. "I suppose I deserve anything," she said. "Thinking all the things I did."

He lifted his hat. "Pardon me, please. The general—"

"Yes," she murmured, "you mustn't keep him waiting. Good-bye, Steve."

The General was waiting for Ramey. The general was older, grayer, with deeper lines in his face, but he was the same man who'd taken Ramey out of the ranks and started him on his way. He got up from his desk and laid his cigar on the edge of the desk and after shaking hands he put his arms around Ramey and shook him. "Beginning to think I'd never see you again, Steve," he said.

Ramey's face was clouded. "I'm sorry you're seeing me under these circumstances, General. I've no proof of anything, but I'd like to tell my story."

The general's face was calm as he picked up his cigar. "I'd like to hear it, too. But first, I don't want you to labor under any

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misconceptions about your status, my boy."

"Status?" Ramey stared.

The general sat down and leaned back in his chair and took a puff on his cigar in obvious enjoyment. "Colonel Bullock was a thorough-going man, Steve. Lucky for you he was. He sent me a full report of the work you were doing."

Steve Ramey was unable to speak. He said, "Then I'm not a deserter?"

There was satisfaction in the general's voice. "Hell, no. You should get a citation. Hard in peacetime, but I'll try."

"But what about the colonel's death? I thought—"

"A sergeant named Oglethorpe got a confession out of Bane. Seems Bane was tied up with the Boss gang. We detained Bane but he broke out. We have the papers out on him."

"I brought him back with me," Ramey said.

The general's eyebrows went up "Where's he now?"

"Captain Purdy took charge of the body."

"He's dead? Of course. How did it happen, Steve?"

Sitting there in the colonel's quarters, with the man across the desk from him who'd done more for him than his own father, Ramey told the entire story. It was a story that took more than two hours. And when he was finished, the general sat in silence. Finally he opened a desk drawer and pulled out an envelope. He tossed the long official envelope across the desk. He said, "I suppose with all that money, you'll resign, Steve. I couldn't blame you if you did, the treatment you've had. But here's something I hope will change your mind—a majority."

Steve stood up. "From a lieutenant to a major? It's against regulations, General."

The general's eyes were twinkling. "Yes? You're telling me? Well, your captaincy came through six months ago. What with the Apaches raiding the mails I suppose you missed it. Any rate, better late than never. And I do hope you'll stay with us, Steve—" He paused and looked thoughtfully at Ramey. "A rich major might be difficult to deal with. So difficult that if you decide to stay, we'd perhaps better make you commandant here."

Ramey said, "Thank you, sir."

"And let me thank you," said the General, "for a job well done. You'd better get cleaned up and into uniform. A young lady is looking for you."

Steve could see her through the window. He looked over his shoulder at the general and stopped but the general said, "Go on, go on."

Outside he looked down the line of officers quarters. Esther was looking anxiously in his direction.

She was dressed in one of Peg Horn's white dresses. She was beautiful, Ramey thought. She said, "Tell me, Steve, tell me quick."

He took her arm. "See that big house? The one where I was?"

She nodded, her ripe red lips parted.

"Just as soon as the chaplain can say the words," he said, "that's our house—yours and mine—until the Army says we'll have to go somewhere else."

"Steve! Everything's all right. They know everything's all right?"

"They know," Ramey said. "But everything won't be all right until I get enough whiskers off so I can kiss my bride without rubbing some skin off."

"Steve!" She kissed him, standing on the tips of her toes, there in sight of a hundred eyes.

Sergeant Oglethorpe, running through the heat of the blistering day, stopped short and stood staring. He rumbled, "By damn," in a pleased sort of tone, and stood there waiting for Ramey to finish before he made his presence known. # # #

LIVED TOO SOON

By DAVID CREWE

DURING the early months of 1943, a Colorado prospector who had done a Rip Van Winkle in the hill country for six years, finally decided to visit civilization and restock on canned goods, etc.

At last he drove his mule up before the old general store where he had traded formerly. Even that was changed. The proprietor and his clerk were both smooth-shaven and wore ties. The store looked all silvery and cream.

The old prospector drew a fair sized pouch of gold dust from a pocket and set it on the counter. He began reeling off the items he needed. The clerk made no effort to serve him. Instead, that sissy like individual asked some fool question about a ration card. The old prospector started all over again. Again the clerk asked that foolish question. The old miner got quite annoyed. He had no fool card, didn't know what it was, and didn't want any. All he wanted, he shouted, were the groceries.

"But you must have a ration card or I can't serve you," the clerk tried to explain.

"I got gold dust right here to pay for anything I want," yelled the old timer, emphasizing his point by pounding the bag on the new marble counter whose clean smoothness irritated him.

He finally got so mad he pulled a gun and demanded to be served or he'd shoot up the fancy doodads in the store, maybe even the clerk and the proprietor as well.

Sad to relate someone took the old timer's gun away from him and he spent the night in jail while two deputies and a town official tried to explain the changes in the world since his last visit.

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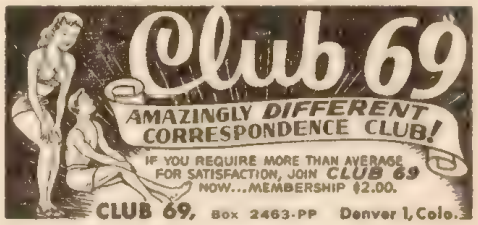
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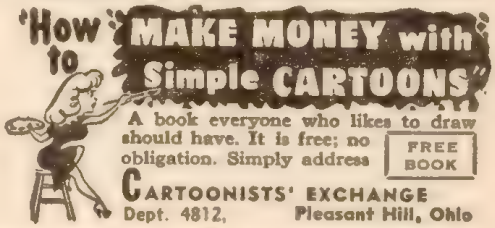
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(Continued from page 73)

is done, justice is done, and you go back to your wife and kids. But if I kill you, what does anybody gain? I go free, just as I was till you found me here, but you're dead. And I'm *still* free."

"What are you driving at?" Jeff asked stolidly.

"I'll make a deal." Burgess took a silver dollar from his pocket and held it in the palm of his left hand. "I'll toss this coin. If it comes down heads, you go back home and forget you ever saw me. If it comes down tails, I'll go back to Cottonwood City with you."

Jeff stared at the silver dollar and the years rolled back to a day when the trail forked and a glittering coin spun into the air.

"That dollar," he said huskily, "is it . . . . ?"

Steve Burgess grinned. "Yeah, it's the same one we used to settle our arguments with. Fact is, I use it to settle all my problems. Sort of a good luck piece." He tossed the coin up and caught it carelessly in his left hand. "What do you say?" he said. "Heads I go free, tails I go back to Cottonwood City."

Jeff shook his head. "Sorry. That's a thing I can't gamble on."

Steve Burgess looked at him steadily for a moment, then his eyes went cold and he snapped, "Well, gamble on this!" and he reached for his gun.

Jeff's hand automatically dipped down and up. Two shots sounded in the narrow canyon, roaring almost as one. Jeff felt a slight tug at his shirt sleeve as a slug singed him but he barely noticed it. Steve Burgess stood rigid for a moment, then fell to the ground clutching at the red stain spreading on his chest.

Jeff holstered his gun and ran to the wounded man. When he turned him over on his back he saw that there was no chance to save him. Steve Burgess was dying.

He seemed to realize it. He opened his eyes as Jeff put an arm under his shoulders and a faint flicker of the old light came into them. "You always were a better shot than me, Jeff," he breathed.

"I'm sorry," Jeff said. "I'm sorry it had to end this way."

Burgess shook his head slightly. "No. This is the best way. You're white, Jeff, all the way through. Me—hell, I never was any good."

SUDDENLY a great bitterness against the injustice of life, the unfairness of life, the cruelty of a fate which would not allow a man to fight back, overwhelmed Jeff Kane.

"It wasn't you," he muttered thickly. "It was the breaks. You got the bad ones, I got the good ones. Like the time you tossed the coin back there where the trail forked. If it had fallen the other way, I might be in your place."

"No, Jeff." The voice was weaker now but there was peace in it. Peace and a touch of regret. "No, you wouldn't, Jeff. A man makes his own breaks. It's what he's got inside that counts, not the way the trail forks, not the way the coin falls. . .."

He paused, as if to gather the last of his ebbing strength, then he whispered weakly, "If you don't believe me, look at the coin, Jeff. . . ."

The body in Jeff Kane's arms stiffened, then relaxed. Gently he eased the fingers apart and picked up the silver dollar lying in the palm. He stared at it, turned it over.

It was heads on both sides. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

GIVE BLOOD

TODAY!

BEST IN THE WEST!

(Continued from page 8)

Jim Bridger was always doing favors for people. Not for nothing did his nickname "Old Gabe" come to stand for courage, honesty, and generosity. When Colonel Fremont was looking for a guide to accompany his Rocky Mountain expedition, Jim suggested Kit Carson who took the job and became famous because of it.

For this action on Jim's part, Kit Carson was appreciative, but others weren't so grateful. Soon after Jim helped Brigham Young get started at Salt Lake City, the Mormon chief turned around and attacked Fort Bridger. And when the U.S. government leased Fort Bridger for $600 a year for ten years, neither Jim nor his heirs were ever able to collect a penny.

Old Jim didn't complain too much. He never was much for fancy talk even though what he said was usually important. Once when introduced to the President of the United States, he commented for all to hear. "Looks jest like any other man to me." And then there was the famous remark of his about the Indians. "Where there ain't none," he said, "you'll find them the thickest."

Once when some friends read *Richard III* to Jim, hoping to interest him in Shakespeare, the old scout got mad. "I ain't gonna listen to such talk about a man mean enuff to kill his own mother." Of Longfellow's *Hiawatha,* he was even more vehement. "No sech Indian ever lived."

Even as an old man, Jim Bridger was formidable. Awakened one night by robbers, he was asked for money. "I'll get up and get it for you," he said. But the minute he arose, the thieves ran without looking back. They had heard of Jim's prowess with a knife and gun.

When the health of the old scout finally failed and he went to the home of his daughter to live, both friend and foe wished him a fond goodbye. The West never again saw the likes of a man like Jim Bridger.

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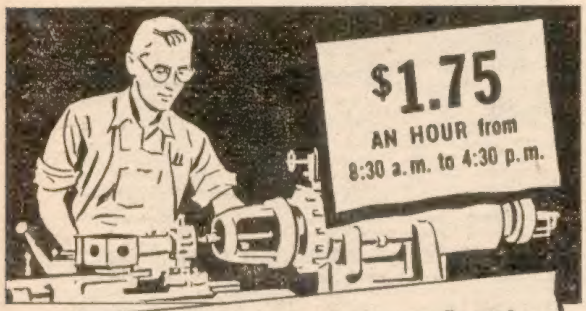

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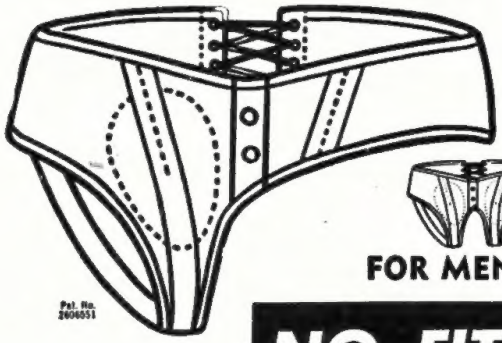

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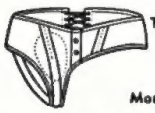

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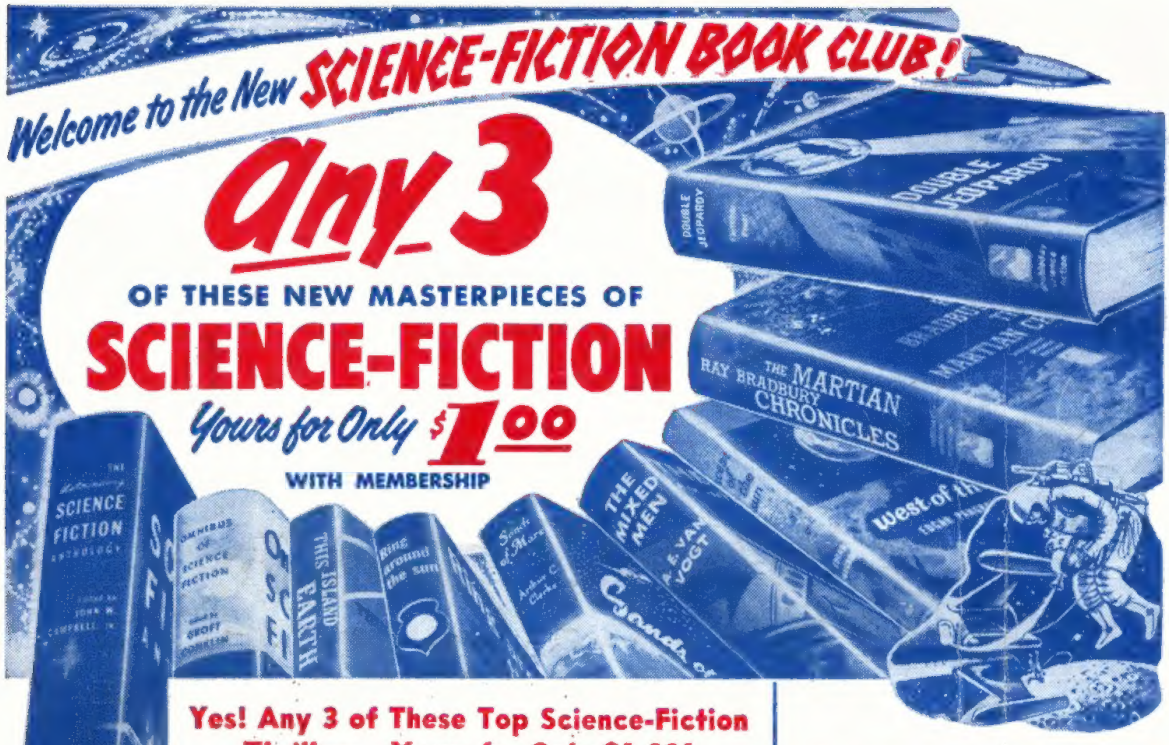

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